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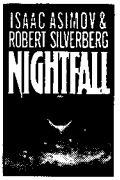

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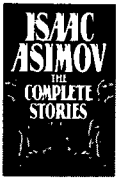

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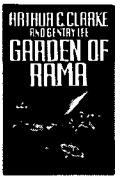

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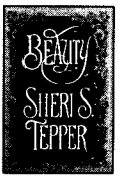

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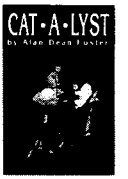

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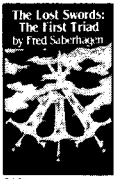

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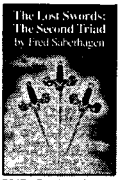

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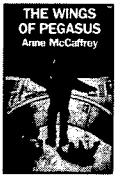

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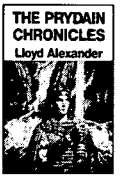

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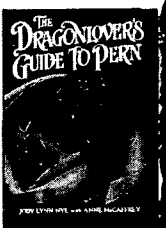

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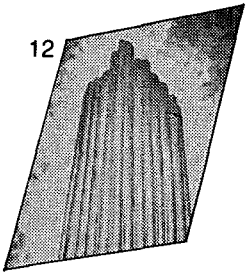

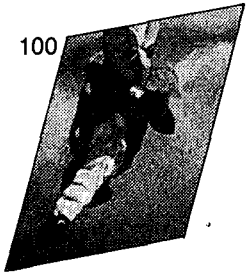

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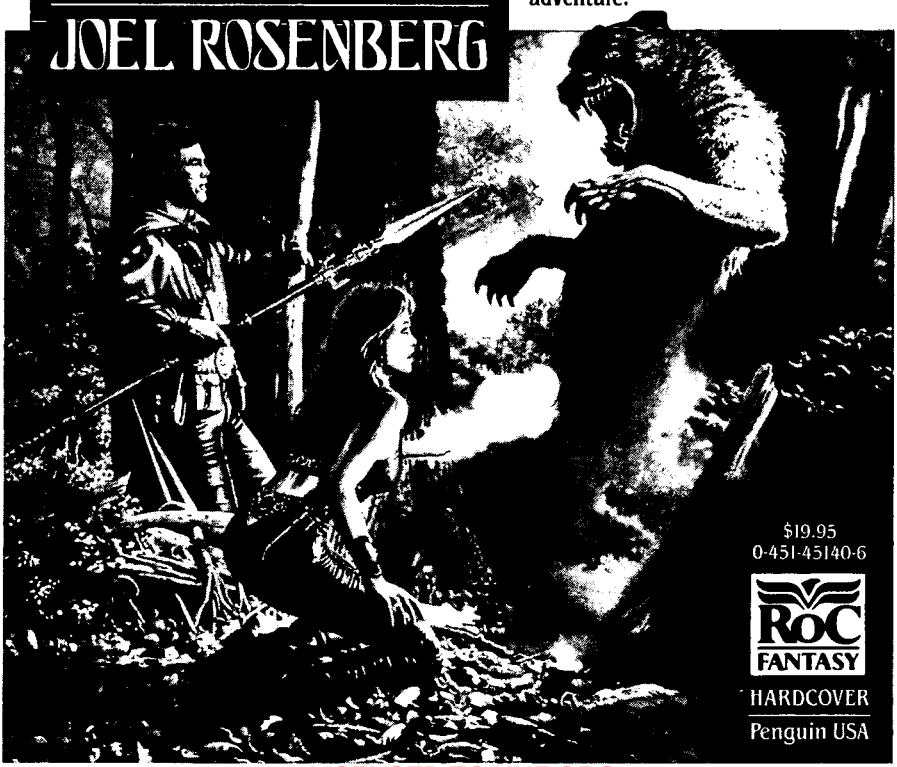

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

RELIGIOSITY

Every once in a while, someone writes an essay denouncing me for being an atheist. I just received a new one entitled, "The trouble with atheists is that they don't *want* to believe."

He ends with the statement that "it is the scientists of shallower mind —axe grinding popularizers like Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov and disgruntled high school teachers —who cling doggedly to the privilege of believing in nothing."

(I don't believe in nothing; I believe in science; but the author of this essay never heard of science, alas.)

Our pious essayist says, "The really brilliant scientists are almost all open to religion, testifies Yale physicist Henry Morgenau, who has worked with Einstein, Dirac, Jastrow, Heisenberg, and Schrodinger. They do not mix religion with science but neither do they exclude it from the sphere of rational conviction. Those who discover wholly new abstract theories of physics, says Professor Morgenau, privately regard their ideas as divine revelations."

Well, let's think about it. Let's gather together one hundred scientists all of whom regard their new abstract theories of physics as being divine revelations.

I would suppose that each of the hundred would work up some sort of theology to account for what they are doing, but I would also suppose that no two of them would have the same sort of theology.

I suppose that each of the hundred would have some vague notion of a God, but that no two would really have the same God and if they tried to argue with each other over the nature of God they would quickly entangle themselves in such an intricate knot of theological religiosity as never to be able to untangle themselves again.

I would even be willing to suppose that each of the hundred goes to some established church and engages in all the rigmarole involved in such a thing. However, I am quite certain that they would divide themselves up into different sects and schisms of religion (not even all Christian—some might be Zen Buddhists) and have nothing to agree on.

I have no objection to scientists engaging in this sort of thing. If it makes them feel good to sup-

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pose they have divine revelations and that there is a God watching over them, why not? Let them feel good.

I am not responsible for what other people think. I am responsible only for what I myself think, and I know what that is. No idea I've ever come up with has ever struck me as a divine revelation. Nothing I have ever observed leads me to think there is a God watching over me.

Although the time of death is approaching for me, I am not afraid of dying and going to Hell, or (what would be considerably worse) going to the popularized version of Heaven. I expect death to be nothingness and by removing from me all possible fears of death, I am thankful to atheism.

But let us turn to these pious people who write essays denouncing atheism. What is it they are *not* denouncing?

Religion?

Whose religion? What are their beliefs?

We know that there are people who call themselves "Christian," by which they mean they are fundamentalists who accept every word of the Bible as basic truth.

Now, then, we have to ask how many scientists there are who are fundamentalist Christians and who accept every word of the Bible as basic truth.

Thus— How many scientists:

1) Believe that the Earth was created some six thousand years ago by some supernatural agency

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who said, "Let there be light" and there was light. Or, how many prefer to believe that there was a Big Bang somewhere about fifteen to thirty billion years ago by means of which our universe was formed.

2) Believe that all the species of Earth were created by divine formation as distinct and separate. Or how many prefer to believe the incredible amount of evidence that makes it quite plain that all these species developed by evolutionary procedures.

3) Believe that the first man and woman, created as such, lived in a place called the Garden of Eden, where they were forbidden to eat a certain fruit. A talking serpent lured them into eating it and God, instantly infuriated, kicked them out of Eden. Or how many prefer to believe that humanity developed over a period of several million years.

4) Believe that God is so malevolent, so short-tempered, so wicked, that he is willing to destroy all humanity but for one family because they have "sinned" and does it by means of a world-wide flood. He then destroys Sodom and Gomorrah by fire from heaven, because they have "sinned." He then destroys several thousand Israelites for cavorting about a calf of gold and "sinning." (This is the all-merciful God.)

5) Believe that there was a world-wide Flood that destroyed everything on Earth roughly about 2700 B.C.

6) Believe that when Lot's wife turned back to look at burning Sodom, she was converted into a pillar of salt.

All these things are myths and fairy-tales, which, if they were found in any other scriptures, in any other "holy books," would be recognized as such and laughed at. But because they occur in our Bible which we are taught from childhood to revere, we accept it all.

Well, I won't accept any of these things, including a great many additional items I haven't bothered to mention. Yes, if atheism involves not believing in these fairy-tales then my trouble is that I don't *want* to believe.

Why should I?

And how many scientists, no matter how filled they are with the feeling of divine revelation, are going to believe any of this nonsense?

Incidentally, the essayist who denounces atheism reveals in every line he writes his complete ignorance of modern science. This does not stop him from arguing, of course.

Besides, I wonder why he bothers yelling at me and calling me names. I don't want to call him names, but if I did, it would amount to nothing. When he dies, he, just like I, will enter a realm of nothingness. He will not be punished for being religious, however foolishly.

I, on the other hand, since I am an atheist, must (according to the beliefs of the pious essayist) be heading straight for Hell when I die. The kind and all-merciful God

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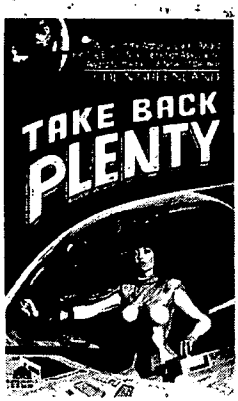

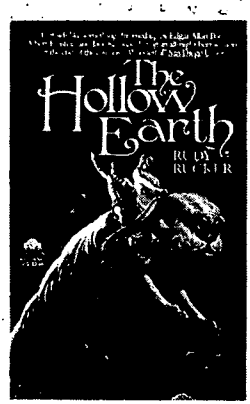

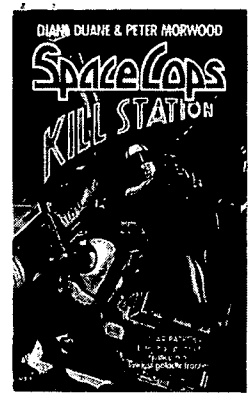

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he believes in has no hesitation in seeing to it that I suffer tortures of the most extreme kind through all eternity.

Given that, what else must I suffer? Isn't it enough to burn in the deathless fires of Hell for trillions of years? Must this person also call me names and yell at me?

Incidentally, I am interested in what it is that fundamentalist television preachers call "sin."

We have just gone through a decade of the twentieth century in which the United States set up a standard of corruption such as has never been seen before. We have worked with junk bonds, we have ripped off the Savings and Loan banks, we have spent money like water, living on borrowed funds until our city, state, and even federal governments have no money.

Yet I don't hear the television preachers call any of this "sin." I hear no denunciations from the pulpit.

Sin to them is a little bit of sexual fun. A touch of adultery gets them all hot and bothered. And, as a matter of fact, a touch of adultery is something they themselves dabble in. They then weep and let the tears run down their cheeks and howl, "I have sinned."

Well, you know, I don't like to believe that either. I don't want to believe that having relations with some woman who is not your wife is supposed to infuriate a kind all-merciful God, while ripping off our nation wholesale and having people steal by the millions leaves him unmoved and untouched.

I hear conservatives say that "liberals" are destroying the family, but it is the conservatives who are destroying the country.

I would be much more impressed by religious people if they weren't so anxious to gather in the loot for themselves, and if they got up on their hind legs and denounced the thieves and crooks who permeate our society.

I don't really think it will happen, however. Religious people are too interested in sex. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I grew up on your *I, Robot* stories and have followed all your subsequent robot stories with interest. I found your most recent story, "Robot Visions" to draw unsupported conclusions and possibly be in conflict with your stated laws of robotics.

The conclusion that I find unsupported in "Robot Visions" is the fact that humans learning of their possible demise two hundred years into the future would turn on and destroy their potential successors, the humaniform robot. I find this contrary to human nature as you have consistently demonstrated that nature in your stories over the years—a nature which is always fighting to survive, sometimes at long odds. And who were the humans' companions in this fight? It was the robots.

The second point which disturbed me about your story was the conclusion of the robot who wrote the story (who I will refer to hereinafter as "the Author"), and that conclusion being by the Author, that humankind was going to die off so, therefore, it was his responsibility as the first humaniform robot to insure the survival of his own kind.

I seem to recall that the First Law of Robotics states that no robot by action or *inaction* will allow harm to come to a human being. If the Author had come to the conclusion that humankind was going to die off within two hundred years, under the Laws of Robotics he had no choice but to at least make an attempt to see that it did not happen, *even if it meant the demise of robots*. I believe for a robot to come to the conclusion based on an observation in future time that humankind will die out and then sit by and allow it to happen so robots may replace humans beings is a violation of your stated Laws of Robotics.

Tony Goss
Honolulu, HI

You may be perfectly right. I must admit that when I write a story, I just write a story and if it doesn't fit the Three Laws of Robotics, the heck with it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois and Mr. Asimov:

I just finished the April double-issue and felt compelled to offer praise for an exceptionally excellent magazine. "Robot Visions," "In Numbers" and "Bully!" alone made the issue worth every cent.

My real reason for writing, however, is to applaud Nancy Kress for

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her outstanding novella, "Beggars in Spain." It's too bad that "unforgettable" is such a shopworn word; it aptly describes this work.

Ms. Kress is, in my mind, one of the most talented writers publishing SF today. It is writers like her that help maintain the high quality of the genre and inspire new writers like myself.

Simon McCaffery
Tulsa, OK

Thank you for your kind letter. Writers always enjoy being praised. Believe me; I know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I bought the April 1991 issue of your magazine and it was quite enjoyable. While I have not been a regular reader of SF in the last few years due to a (now) aborted musical career and, of late, my (now) burgeoning writing career, I picked up the current issue because of the "14th Anniversary" cover blurb. My gosh, I was a junior in high school when *IAsfm* first hit the stands and I bought every issue religously for the next four years. Times change, though, and I eventually dropped my subscription to *F&SF*, *Locus* and my regular reading of SF and fantasy.

Lately, though, I have been going through a renewed love affair with the printed word and I intend to pick up more copies of *IAsfm* and *F&SF*.

One suggestion: I am currently reading your autobiography *In Memory Yet Green/In Joy Still Felt* for the third time. It is just as entertaining and inspiring as the first time I read it and once I finish it again, I will have just one question: What happens next? How about a third installment of your autobiography, *The Scenes of Life*. Of course, this would be a bit short compared to the other two volumes, covering only about fourteen years. What I'm interested in is your experiences with the technologies of the 80s and 90s, specifically computers and word processing. What makes your autobiography so fascinating is that it is a personal view of the history of the United States and we are shown reactions to new technologies with a regularity of vision and personality. I would love to know what your thoughts are on compact discs, laser discs, personal computers, VCR's, video stores, Reagan, Bush, and other elements of modern life.

Thank you for many reading pleasures.

Andrew Barnachea

Who knows, when the third volume of my autobiography will be out? It's at my publishers but they're waiting for me to finish my current novel. It will be a long wait.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was disappointed by your response to Kristy Merrill's letter (April 1991). Disappointed in that someone supposedly so logical and rational as yourself could support such an absurd theory. (Namely, that the rotten behavior of individuals is somehow caused by overpopulation.)

Ask yourself this simple (and

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yes, rational) question: How is it that some persons have lived in over-crowded, over-populated areas all their lives and have managed to *not* be murderers, rapists, or vandals, and have even remained good liberals? (Like you, for example.) Could it be that the behavior of individuals is determined by the basic character and values of those individuals and has absolutely nothing to do with population numbers? I think it could.

M. Russell
Los Angeles, CA

I was brought up in the slums, under terribly crowded conditions, BUT I had a father and mother who had ambitions for me, who would not allow me to play with "the bums," who insisted I do my schoolwork, who went to a great deal of trouble to send me off to college. However, these are exceptional conditions. Most people brought up in the slums are failures and losers.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In 1981, the year I graduated from high school, I got a subscription to *IAsfm*. Your magazine helped me through college, medical school, and three years of finding myself. Now I'm about to start a residency and *IAsfm* will be there with me. Even at my busiest in med school, when I was tossing all my other magazines for lack of time, I kept *IAsfm*. When I had time again, the ecstasy of reading six months of *IAsfm* at once was almost too much for me.

Obviously, your magazine is a keeper. While it's changed over the years, its essence has remained the same. I've changed, too. At first, I hated your George and Azazel stories since they were so punny and gave me a headache from groaning. Now, for some reason, I giggle instead of groan and actually look forward to new stories. You explain it.

I enjoy the editorials and letters. As to the current issue of profanity, I feel it's sometimes pertinent to have it in a story, as life isn't always pretty. Frankly, though, I am more impressed by a writer who can make the point with a concept written such that I'm compelled to see and feel the scene in my imagination rather than through the shock treatment of profanity. Understatement often has a greater impact than a graphic style. In any event, if one doesn't like the profanity, just turn the page.

Your magazine has good poetry and has converted me to the belief that a poem can be as entertaining as any story. I'm most impressed with Joe Haldeman, who must have a neat mind.

I've read *IAsfm* cover to cover for ten years. I haven't liked every story I've read, but I figure no one likes everything. I have liked the majority. I've really enjoyed the last ten years and am looking forward to the next ten. I want to thank you, the editors past & present, the rest of the staff, and especially the writers. It's been great!

Patti Lee Palmer, MD
Dallas, TX

Note the way George and Azazel grows on you. Sometimes, it takes a while before you get the drift of what it is I'm trying to do.

—Isaac Asimov

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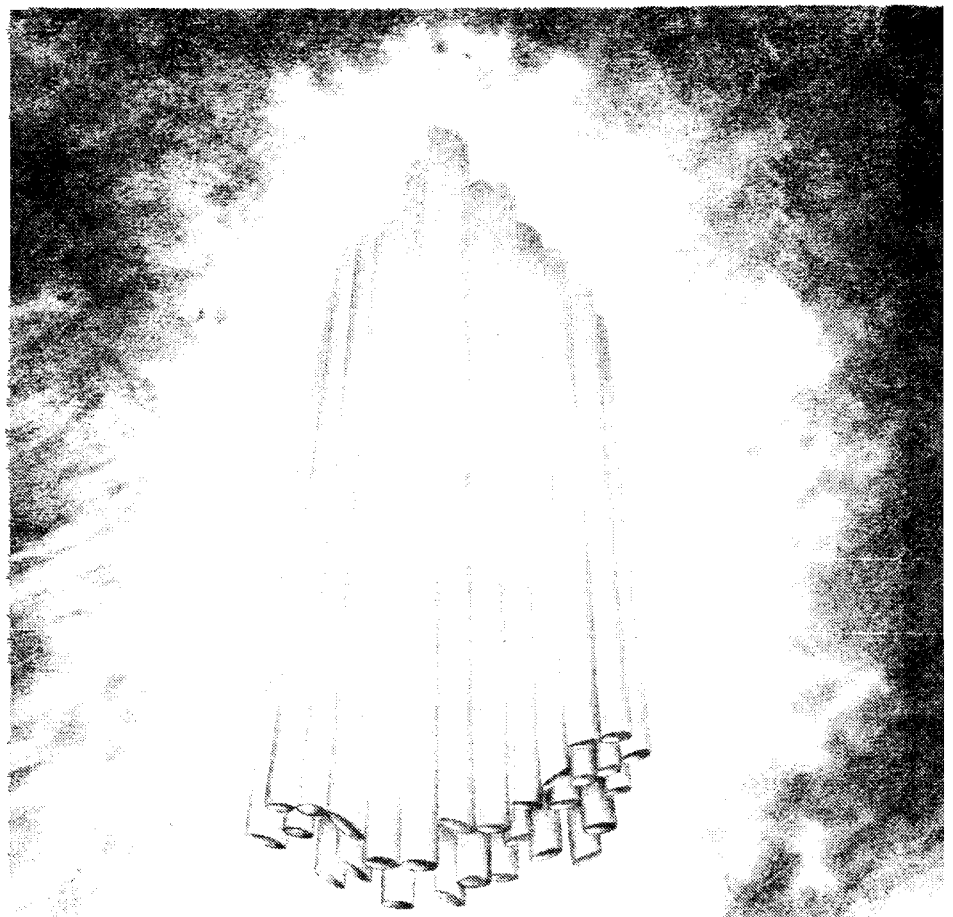

For rescue workers in The Intake,
saving lives is a race across time and . . .

INTO DARKNESS

art: Bob Walters

by Greg Egan

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The tone from the buzzer rises in both pitch and loudness the longer it's on, so I leap out of bed knowing that it's taken me less than a second to wake. I swear I was dreaming it first, though, dreaming the sound long before it was real. That's happened a few times. Maybe it's just a trick of the mind; maybe some dreams take shape only in the act of remembering them. Or maybe I dream it every night, every sleeping moment, just in case.

The light above the buzzer is red. Not a rehearsal.

I dress on my way across the room to thump the acknowledgment switch; as soon as the buzzer shuts off, I can hear the approaching siren. It takes me as long to lace my shoes as everything else combined. I grab my backpack from beside the bed and flick on the power. It starts flashing LEDs as it goes through its self-checking routines.

By the time I'm at the curb, the patrol car is braking noisily, rear passenger door swinging open. I know the driver, Angelo, but I haven't seen the other cop before. As we accelerate, a satellite view of The Intake in false-color infrared—a pitch black circle in a landscape of polychromatic blotches—appears on the car's terminal. A moment later, this is replaced by a street map of the region—one of the newer far northern suburbs, all cul-de-sacs and crescents—with The Intake's perimeter and center marked, and a dashed line showing where The Core should be. The optimal routes are omitted; too much clutter and the mind balks. I stare at the map, trying to commit it to memory. It's not that I won't have access to it, inside, but it's always faster to just *know*. When I close my eyes to see how I'm going, the pattern in my head looks like nothing so much as a puzzle-book maze.

We hit the freeway, and Angelo lets loose. He's a good driver, but I sometimes wonder if this is the riskiest part of the whole business. The cop I don't know doesn't think so; he turns to me and says, "I gotta tell you one thing; I respect what you do, but you must be fucking crazy. I wouldn't go inside that thing for a million dollars." Angelo grins—I catch it in the rear-view mirror—and says, "Hey, how much is the Nobel prize, anyway? More than a million?"

I snort. "I doubt it. And I don't think they give the Nobel prize for the eight hundred meter steeplechase." The media seem to have decided to portray me as some kind of expert; I don't know why—unless it's because I once used the phrase "radially anisotropic" in an interview. It's true that I carried one of the first scientific "payloads," but any other Runner could have done that, and these days it's routine. The fact is, by international agreement, no one with even a microscopic chance of contributing to the theory of The Intake is allowed to risk their life by going inside. If I'm atypical in any way, it's through a *lack* of relevant quali-

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fications; most of the other volunteers have a background in the conventional rescue services.

I switch my watch into chronograph mode, and synch it to the count that the terminal's now showing, then do the same to my backpack's timer. Six minutes and twelve seconds. The Intake's manifestations obey exactly the same statistics as a radioactive nucleus with a half-life of eighteen minutes; 79 percent last six minutes or more—but multiply anything by 0.962 every minute, and you wouldn't believe how fast it can fall. I've memorized the probabilities right out to an hour (10 percent), which may or may not have been a wise thing to do. Counter to intuition, The Intake does *not* become more dangerous as time passes, any more than a single radioactive nucleus becomes "more unstable." At any given moment—assuming that it hasn't yet vanished—it's just as likely as ever to stick around for another eighteen minutes. A mere 10 percent of manifestations last for an hour or more—but *of that 10 percent*, half will still be there eighteen minutes later. The danger has not increased.

For a Runner, inside, to ask what the odds are *now*, he or she must be alive to pose the question, and so the probability curve must start afresh from that moment. History can't harm you; the "chance" of *having survived* the last x minutes is 100 percent, once you've done it. As the unknowable future becomes the unchangeable past, risk must collapse into certainty, one way or another.

Whether or not any of us really think this way is another question. You can't help having a gut feeling that time is running out, that the odds are being whittled away. Everyone keeps track of the time since The Intake materialized, however theoretically irrelevant that is. The truth is, these abstractions make no difference in the end. You do what you can, as fast as you can, regardless.

It's two in the morning, the freeway is empty, but it still takes me by surprise when we screech onto the exit ramp so soon. My stomach is painfully tight. I wish I felt *ready*, but I never do. I always wish I had more time to compose myself, although I have no idea what state of mind I'd aim for, let alone how I'd achieve it. Some lunatic part of me is always hoping for a *delay*. If what I'm really hoping is that The Intake will have vanished before I can reach it, I shouldn't be here at all.

The coordinators tell us, over and over: "You can back out any time you want to. Nobody would think any less of you." It's true, of course, (up to the point where backing out becomes physically impossible), but it's a freedom I could do without. Retiring would be one thing, but once I've accepted a call I don't want to have to waste my energy on second thoughts, I don't want to have to endlessly reaffirm my choice. I've psyched myself into half believing that *I* couldn't live with myself, however understanding other people might be, and that helps a little. The only

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trouble is, this lie might be self-fulfilling, and I really don't want to become that kind of person.

I close my eyes, and the map appears before me. I'm a mess, there's no denying it, but I can still do the job, I can still get results. That's what counts.

I can tell when we're getting close, without even searching the skyline; there are lights on in all the houses, and families standing in their front yards. Many people wave and cheer as we pass, a sight that always depresses me. When a group of teenagers, standing on a street corner drinking beer, scream abuse and gesture obscenely, I can't help feeling perversely encouraged.

"Dickheads," mutters the cop I don't know. I keep my mouth shut.

We take a corner, and I spot a trio of helicopters, high on my right, ascending with a huge projection screen in tow. Suddenly, a corner of the screen is obscured, and my eye extends the curve of the eclipsing object from this one tiny arc to giddy completion.

From the outside, by day, The Intake makes an impressive sight: a giant black dome, completely nonreflective, blotting out a great bite of the sky. It's impossible not to believe that you're confronting a massive, solid object. By night, though, it's different. The shape is still unmistakable, cut in a velvet black that makes the darkest night seem grey, but there's no illusion of solidity; just an awareness of a different kind of void.

The Intake has been appearing for almost ten years now. It's always a perfect sphere, a little more than a kilometer in radius, and usually centered close to ground level. On rare occasions, it's been known to appear out at sea, and, slightly more often, on uninhabited land, but the vast majority of its incarnations take place in populated regions.

The currently favored hypothesis is that a future civilization tried to construct a wormhole that would let them sample the distant past, bringing specimens of ancient life into their own time to be studied. They screwed up. Both ends of the wormhole came unstuck. The thing has shrunk and deformed, from—presumably—some kind of grand temporal highway, bridging geological epochs, to a gateway that now spans less time than it would take to cross an atomic nucleus at the speed of light. One end—The Intake—is a kilometer in radius; the other is about a fifth as big, spatially concentric with the first, but displaced an almost immeasurably small time into the future. We call the inner sphere—the wormhole's destination, which seems to be inside it, but isn't—The Core.

Why this shriveled-up piece of failed temporal engineering has ended up in the present era is anyone's guess; maybe we just happened to be halfway between the original endpoints, and the thing collapsed symmetrically. Pure bad luck. The trouble is, it hasn't quite come to rest. It

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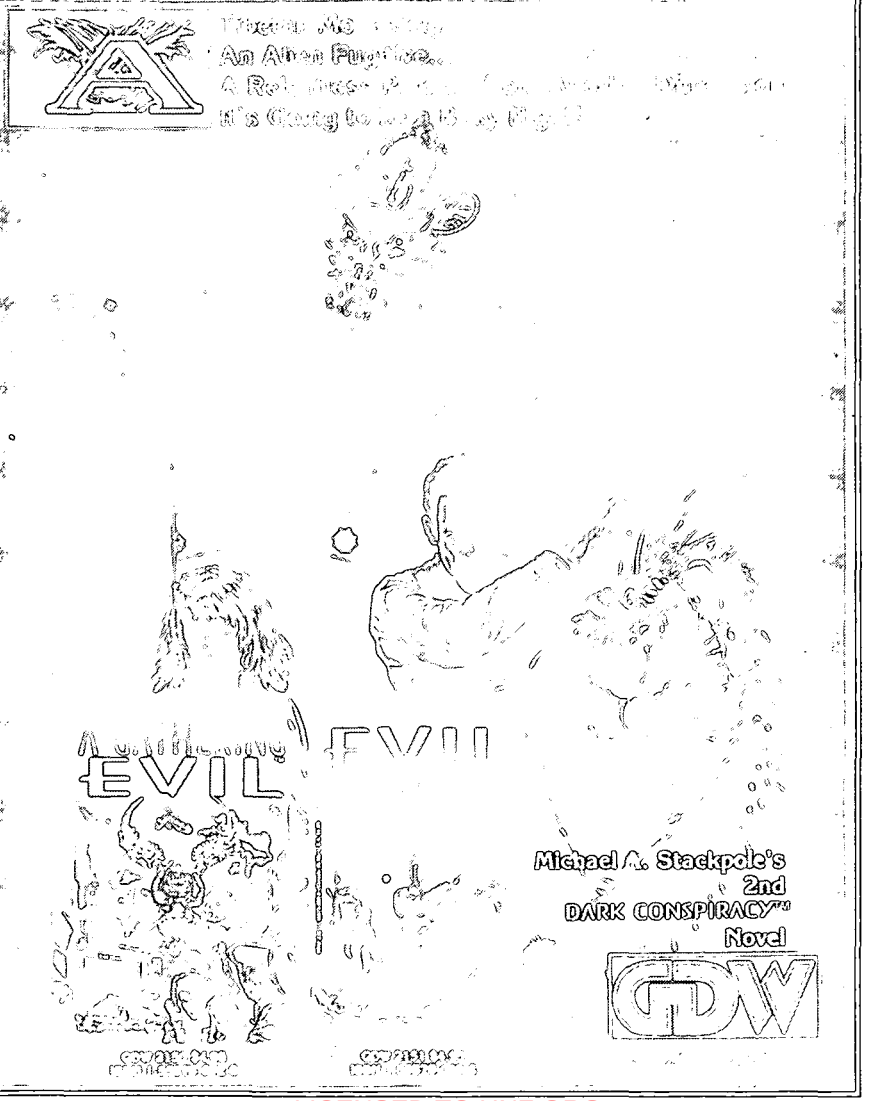
EVIL ASCENDING



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materializes somewhere on the planet, remains fixed for several minutes, then loses its grip and vanishes, only to appear at a new location a fraction of a second later. Ten years of analyzing the data has yielded no method for predicting successive locations, but there must be some remnant of a navigation system in action; why else would the wormhole cling to the Earth's surface (with a marked preference for inhabited, dry land) instead of wandering off on a random course into interplanetary space? It's as if some faithful, demented computer keeps valiantly trying to anchor The Intake to a region which might be of interest to its scholarly masters; no Paleozoic life can be found, but twenty-first century cities will do, since there's nothing much else around. And every time it fails to make a permanent connection and slips off into hyperspace, with infinite dedication, and unbounded stupidity, it tries again.

Being of interest is bad news. Inside the wormhole, time is mixed with one spatial dimension, and—whether by design or physical necessity—any movement which equates to traveling from the future into the past is forbidden. Translated into the wormhole's present geometry, this means that when The Intake materializes around you, motion away from the center is impossible. You have an unknown time—maybe eighteen minutes, maybe more, maybe less—to navigate your way to the safety of The Core, under these bizarre conditions. What's more, light is subject to the same effect; it only propagates inward. Everything closer to the center than you lies in the invisible future. You're running into darkness.

I have heard people scoff at the notion that any of this could be difficult. I'm not quite enough of a sadist to hope that they learn the truth, first hand.

Actually, outward motion isn't quite literally impossible. If it were, everyone caught in The Intake would die at once. The heart has to circulate blood, the lungs have to inhale and exhale, nerve impulses have to travel in all directions. Every single living cell relies on shuffling chemicals back and forth, and I can't even guess what the effect would be on the molecular level, if electron clouds could fluctuate in one direction but not the reverse.

There is some leeway. Because the wormhole's entire eight hundred meters spans such a minute time interval, the distance scale of the human body corresponds to an even shorter period—short enough for quantum effects to come into play. Quantum uncertainty in the space-time metric permits small, localized violations of the classical law's absolute restriction.

So, instead of everyone dying on the spot, blood pressure goes up, the heart is stressed, breathing becomes laborious, and the brain may function erratically. Enzymes, hormones, and other biological molecules are all slightly deformed, causing them to bind less efficiently to their tar-

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gets, interfering to some degree with every biochemical process; hemoglobin, for example, loses its grip on oxygen more easily. Water diffuses out of the body—because random thermal motion is suddenly not so random—leading to gradual dehydration.

People already in very poor health can die from these effects. Others are just made nauseous, weak and confused—on top of the inevitable shock and panic. They make bad decisions. They get trapped.

One way or another, a few hundred lives are lost, every time The Intake materializes. Intake Runners may save ten or twenty people, which I'll admit is not much of a success rate, but until some genius works out how to rid us of the wormhole for good, it's better than nothing.

The screen is in place high above us, when we reach the "South Operations Center"—a couple of vans, stuffed with electronics, parked on someone's front lawn. The now-familiar section of street map appears, the image rock steady and in perfect focus, in spite of the fact that it's being projected from a fourth helicopter, and all four are jittering in the powerful inward wind. People inside can see out, of course; this map—and the others, at the other compass points—will save dozens of lives. In theory, once outdoors, it should be simple enough to head straight for The Core; after all, there's no easier direction to find, no easier path to follow. The trouble is, a straight line inward is likely to lead you into obstacles, and when you can't retrace your steps, the most mundane of these can kill you.

So, the map is covered with arrows, marking the optimal routes to The Core, given the constraint of staying safely on the roads. Two more helicopters, hovering above The Intake, are doing one better: with high-velocity paint guns under computer control, and laser-ring inertial guidance systems constantly telling the shuddering computers their precise location and orientation, they're drawing the same arrows in fluorescent/reflective paint on the invisible streets below. You can't see the arrows ahead of you, but you can look back at the ones you've passed. It helps.

There's a small crowd of coordinators, and one or two Runners, around the vans. This scene always looks forlorn to me, like some small-time rained-out amateur athletics event, air traffic notwithstanding. Angelo calls out, "Break a leg!" as I run from the car. I raise a hand and wave without turning. Loudspeakers are blasting the standard advice inward, cycling through a dozen languages. In the corner of my eye I can see a TV crew arriving. I glance at my watch. Nine minutes. I can't help thinking, *71 percent*, although The Intake is, clearly, 100 percent still there. Someone taps me on the shoulder. Elaine. She smiles and says, "John, see you in The Core," then sprints into the wall of darkness before I can reply.

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Dolores is handing out assignments on RAM. She wrote most of the software used by Intake Runners around the world, but then, she makes her living writing computer games. She's even written a game which models The Intake itself, but sales have been less than spectacular; the reviewers decided it was in bad taste. "What's next? Let's play Airline Disaster?" Maybe they think flight simulators should be programmed for endless calm weather. Meanwhile, televangelists sell prayers to keep the wormhole away; you just slip that credit card into the home-shopping slot for instant protection.

"What have you got for me?"

"Three infants."

"Is that *all?*"

"You come late, you get the crumbs."

I plug the cartridge into my backpack. A sector of the street map appears on the display panel, marked with three bright red dots. I strap on the pack, and then adjust the display on its movable arm so I can catch it with a sideways glance, if I have to. Electronics can be made to function reliably inside the wormhole, but everything has to be specially designed.

It's not ten minutes, not quite. I grab a cup of water from a table beside one of the vans. A solution of mixed carbohydrates, supposedly optimized for our metabolic needs, is also on offer, but the one time I tried it I was sorry; my gut isn't interested in absorbing anything at this stage, optimized or not. There's coffee too, but the very last thing I need right now is a stimulant. Gulping down the water, I hear my name, and I can't help tuning in to the TV reporter's spiel.

". . . John Nately, high school science teacher and unlikely hero, embarking on this, his *eleventh* call as a volunteer Intake Runner. If he survives tonight, he'll have set a new national record—but of course, the odds of making it through grow slimmer with every call, and by now . . ."

The moron is spouting crap—the odds *do not* grow slimmer, a veteran faces no extra risk—but this isn't the time to set him straight. I swing my arms for a few seconds in a half-hearted warm-up, but there's not much point; every muscle in my body is tense, and will be for the next eight hundred meters, whatever I do. I try to blank my mind and just concentrate on the run-up—the faster you hit The Intake, the less of a shock it is—and before I can ask myself, for the first time tonight, what the fuck I'm really doing here, I've left the isotropic universe behind, and the question is academic.

The darkness doesn't swallow you. Perhaps that's the strangest part of all. You've seen it swallow other Runners; why doesn't it swallow *you?* Instead, it recedes from your every step. The borderline isn't absolute; quantum fuzziness produces a gradual fade-out, stretching visibility

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about as far as each extended foot. By day, this is completely surreal, and people have been known to suffer fits and psychotic episodes at the sight of the void's apparent retreat. By night, it seems merely implausible, like chasing an intelligent fog.

At the start, it's almost too easy; memories of pain and fatigue seem ludicrous. Thanks to frequent rehearsals in a compression harness, the pattern of resistance as I breathe is almost familiar. Runners once took drugs to lower their blood pressure, but with sufficient training, the body's own vasoregulatory system can be made flexible enough to cope with the stress, unaided. The odd tugging sensation on each leg as I bring it forward would probably drive me mad, if I didn't (crudely) understand the reason for it: inward motion is resisted, when pulling, rather than pushing, is involved, because *information* travels outward. If I trailed a ten-meter rope behind me, I wouldn't be able to take a single step; pulling on the rope would pass information about my motion from where I am to a point further out. That's forbidden, and it's only the quantum leeway that lets me drag each foot forward at all.

The street curves gently to the right, gradually losing its radial orientation, but there's no convenient turn-off yet. I stay in the middle of the road, straddling the double white line, as the border between past and future swings to the left. The road surface seems always to slope toward the darkness, but that's just another wormhole effect; the bias in thermal molecular motion—cause of the inward wind, and slow dehydration—produces a force, or pseudo-force, on solid objects, too, tilting the apparent vertical.

"—me! *Please!*"

A man's voice, desperate and bewildered—and almost indignant, as if he can't help believing that I must have heard him all along, that I must have been feigning deafness out of malice or indifference. I turn, without slowing; I've learnt to do it in a way that makes me only slightly dizzy. Everything appears almost normal, looking outward—apart from the fact that the streetlights are out, and so most illumination is from helicopter floodlights and the giant street map in the sky. The cry came from a bus shelter, all vandal-proof plastic and reinforced glass, at least five meters behind me, now; it might as well be on Mars. Wire mesh covers the glass; I can just make out the figure behind it, a faint silhouette.

"Help me!"

Mercifully—for me—I've vanished into this man's darkness; I don't have to think of a gesture to make, an expression to put on my face, appropriate to the situation. I turn away, and pick up speed. I'm not inured to the death of strangers, but I am inured to my helplessness.

After ten years of The Intake, there are international standards for

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painted markings on the ground around every potential hazard in public open space. Like all the other measures, it helps, slightly. There are standards, too, for eventually eliminating the hazards—designing out the corners where people can be trapped—but that's going to cost billions, and take decades, and won't even touch the real problem: interiors. I've seen demonstration trap-free houses and office blocks, with doors, or curtained doorways, in *every* corner of *every* room, but the style hasn't exactly caught on. My own house is far from ideal; after getting quotes for alterations, I decided that the cheapest solution was to keep a sledgehammer beside every wall.

I turn left, just in time to see a trail of glowing arrows hiss into place on the road behind me.

I'm almost at my first assignment. I tap a button on my backpack and peer sideways at the display, as it switches to a plan of the target house. As soon as The Intake's position is known, Dolores's software starts hunting through databases, assembling a list of locations where there's a reasonable chance that we can do some good. Our information is never complete, and sometimes just plain wrong; Census data is often out of date, building plans can be inaccurate, misfiled, or simply missing—but it beats walking blind into houses chosen at random.

I slow almost to a walk, two houses before the target, to give myself time to grow used to the effects. Running inward lessens the outward components—relative to the wormhole—of the body's cyclic motions; slowing down always feels like precisely the wrong thing to do. I often dream of running through a narrow canyon, no wider than my shoulders, whose walls will stay apart only so long as I move fast enough; that's what my body thinks of *slowing down.*

The street here lies about thirty degrees off radial. I cross the front lawn of the neighboring house, then step over a knee-high brick wall. At this angle, there are few surprises; most of what's hidden is so easy to extrapolate that it almost seems visible in the mind's eye. A corner of the target house emerges from the darkness on my left; I get my bearings from it and head straight for a side window. Entry by the front door would cost me access to almost half of the house, including the bedroom which Dolores's highly erratic Room Use Predictor nominates as the one most likely to be the child's. People can file room use information with us directly, but few bother.

I smash the glass with a crowbar, open the window, and clamber through. I leave a small electric lamp on the windowsill—carrying it with me would render it useless—and move slowly into the room. I'm already starting to feel dizzy and nauseous, but I force myself to concentrate. One step too many, and the rescue becomes ten times more difficult. Two steps, and it's impossible.

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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

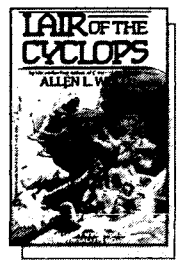
For some reason an integral part of the human psyche is curiosity—we just can't wait to see what might be lurking around the next corner.

Adventures are probably at their safest when they exist on the printed page. The saga of an interplanetary treasure hunter like Rikard Braeth or the quest of a group of young adventurers like in THE TEMPER OF WISDOM feeds our curiosity with new corners to peek around in every chapter...and when the new adventure is over I always find myself craving more.

When you see me around ask me about sleeping (after all, February '92 is going to be dream month at Questar).

ALSO THIS MONTH:

LAIR OF THE CYCLOPS



From the bestselling author of *Crown of the Serpent*—and in the tradition of Steve Perry's *Matadora* series—here is the third book to star Rikard Braeth, interplanetary adventurer extraordinaire!

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Also read:
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It's clear that I have the right room when a dresser is revealed, piled with plastic toys, talcum powder, baby shampoo, and other paraphernalia spilling onto the floor. Then a corner of the crib appears on my left, pointed at an unexpected angle; the thing was probably neatly parallel to the wall to start with, but slid unevenly under the inward force. I sidle up to it, then inch forward, until a lump beneath the blanket comes into view. I hate this moment, but the longer I wait, the harder it gets. I reach sideways and lift the child, bringing the blanket with it. I kick the crib aside, then walk forward, slowly bending my arms, until I can slip the child into the harness on my chest. An adult is strong enough to drag a small baby a short distance outward. It's usually fatal.

The kid hasn't stirred; he or she is unconscious, but breathing. I shudder briefly, a kind of shorthand emotional catharsis, then I start moving. I glance at the display to recheck the way out, and finally let myself notice the time. Thirteen minutes. Sixty-one percent. More to the point, The Core is just two or three minutes away, downhill, non-stop. One successful assignment means ditching the rest. There's no alternative; you can't lug a child with you, in and out of buildings; you can't even put it down somewhere and come back for it later.

As I step through the front door, the sense of relief leaves me giddy. Either that, or renewed cerebral blood flow. I pick up speed as I cross the lawn—and catch a glimpse of a woman, shouting, "Wait! Stop!"

I slow down; she catches up with me. I put a hand on her shoulder and propel her slightly ahead of me, then say, "Keep moving, as fast as you can. When you want to speak, fall behind me. I'll do the same. Okay?"

I move ahead of her. She says, "That's my daughter you've got. Is she all right? Oh, please. . . . Is she alive?"

"She's fine. Stay calm. We just have to get her to The Core now. Okay?"

"I want to hold her. I want to take her."

"Wait until we're safe."

"I want to take her there myself."

Shit. I glance at her sideways. Her face is glistening with sweat and tears. One of her arms is bruised and blotchy, the usual symptom of trying to reach out to something unreachable.

"I really think it would be better to wait."

"What right have you got? She's *my* daughter! Give her to me!" The woman is indignant, but remarkably lucid, considering what she's been through. I can't imagine what it must have felt like, to stand by that house, hoping insanely for some kind of miracle, while everyone in the neighborhood fled past her, and the side-effects made her sicker and sicker. However pointless, however idiotic her courage, I can't help admiring it.

I'm lucky. My ex-wife, and our son and daughter, live half-way across

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town from me. I have no friends who live nearby. My emotional geography is very carefully arranged; I don't give a shit about anyone who I could end up unable to save.

So what do I do—sprint away from her, leave her running after me, screaming? Maybe I should. *If I gave her the child, though, I could check out one more house.*

"Do you know how to handle her? Never try to move her backward, away from the darkness. *Never.*"

"I know that. I've read all the articles. I *know* what you're meant to do."

"Okay." I must be crazy. We slow down to a walk, and I pass the child to her, lowering it into her arms from beside her. I realize, almost too late, that we're at the turn-off for the second house. As the woman vanishes into the darkness, I yell after her, "*Run!* Follow the arrows, and *run!*"

I check the time. Fifteen minutes already, with all that shuffling around. I'm still alive, though—so the odds now are, as always, fifty-fifty that the wormhole will last another eighteen minutes. Of course I could die at any second—but that was equally true when I first stepped inside. I'm no greater fool now than I was then. For what that's worth.

The second house is empty, and it's easy to see why. The computer's guess for the nursery is in fact a study, and the parents' bedroom is outward of the child's. Windows are open, clearly showing the path they must have taken.

A strange mood overtakes me, as I leave the house behind. The inward wind seems stronger than ever, the road turns straight into the darkness, and I feel an inexplicable tranquillity wash over me. I'm moving as fast as I can, but the edge of latent panic, of sudden death, is gone. My lungs, my muscles, are battling all the same restraints, but I feel curiously detached from them; aware of the pain and effort, yet somehow uninvolved.

The truth is, I know exactly why I'm here. I can never quite admit it, outside—it seems too whimsical, too bizarre. Of course I'm glad to save lives, and maybe that's grown to be part of it. No doubt I also crave to be thought of as a hero. The real reason, though, is too strange to be judged either selfless or vain:

The wormhole makes tangible the most basic truths of existence. You cannot see the future. You cannot change the past. All of life consists of running into darkness. This is why I'm here.

My body grows, not numb, but separate, a puppet dancing and twitching on a treadmill. I snap out of this and check the map, not a moment too soon. I have to turn right, sharply, which puts an end to any risk of somnambulism. Looking up at the bisected world makes my head pound,

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so I stare at my feet, and try to recall if the pooling of blood in my left hemisphere ought to make me more rational, or less.

The third house is in a borderline situation. The parents' bedroom is slightly outward from the child's, but the doorway gives access to only half the room. I enter through a window that the parents could not have used.

The child is dead. I see the blood before anything else. I feel, suddenly, very tired. A slit of the doorway is visible, and I know what must have happened. The mother or father edged their way in, and found they could just reach the child—could take hold of one hand, but no more. Pulling inward is resisted, but people find that confusing; they don't expect it, and when it happens, they fight it. When you want to snatch someone you love out of the jaws of danger, you pull with all your strength.

The door is an easy exit for me, but less so for anyone who came in that way—especially someone in the throes of grief. I stare into the darkness of the room's inward corner, and yell, "Crouch down, as low as you can," then mime doing so. I pluck the demolition gun from my backpack, and aim high. The recoil, in normal space, would send me sprawling; here it's a mere thump.

I step forward, giving up my own chance to use the door. There's no immediate sign that I've just blasted a meter-wide hole in the wall; virtually all of the dust and debris is on the inward side. I finally reach a man kneeling in the corner, his hands on his head; for a brief moment I think he's alive, that he took this position to shield himself from the blast. No pulse, no respiration. A dozen broken ribs, probably; I'm not inclined to check. Some people can last for an hour, pinned between walls of brick and an invisible, third wall that follows them ruthlessly into the corner, every time they slip, every time they give ground. Some people, though, do exactly the worst thing; they squeeze themselves into the inward-most part of their prison, obeying some instinct which, I'm sure, makes sense at the time.

Or maybe he wasn't confused at all. Maybe he just wanted it to be over.

I hoist myself through the hole in the wall. I stagger through the kitchen. The fucking plan is wrong wrong wrong, a door I'm expecting doesn't exist. I smash the kitchen window, then cut my hand on the way out.

I refuse to glance at the map. I don't want to know the time. Now that I'm alone, with no purpose left but saving myself, everything is jinxed. I stare at the ground, at the fleeting magic golden arrows, trying not to count them.

One glimpse of a festering hamburger discarded on the road, and I find myself throwing up. Common sense tells me to turn and face backward,

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but I'm not quite that stupid. The acid in my throat and nose brings tears to my eyes. As I shake them away, something impossible happens.

A brilliant blue light appears, high up in the darkness ahead, dazzling my dark adapted eyes. I shield my face, then peer between my fingers. As I grow used to the glare, I start to make out details.

A cluster of long, thin, luminous cylinders is hanging in the sky, like some mad upside-down pipe organ built of glass, bathed in glowing plasma. The light it casts does nothing to reveal the houses and streets below. I must be hallucinating; I've seen shapes in the darkness before, although never anything so spectacular, so persistent. I run faster, in the hope of clearing my head. The apparition doesn't vanish, or waver; it merely grows closer.

I halt, shaking uncontrollably. I stare into the impossible light. What if it's *not* in my head? There's only one possible explanation. Some component of the wormhole's hidden machinery has revealed itself. The idiot navigator is showing me its worthless soul.

With one voice in my skull screaming, *No!* and another calmly asserting that I have no choice, that this chance might never come again, I draw the demolition gun, take aim, and fire. As if some puny weapon in the hands of an amoeba could scratch the shimmering artifact of a civilization whose *failures* leave us cowering in awe.

The structure shatters and implodes in silence. The light contracts to a blinding pinprick, burning itself into my vision. Only when I turn my head am I certain that the real light is gone.

I start running again. Terrified, elated. I have no idea what I've done, but the wormhole is, so far, unchanged. The afterimage lingers in the darkness, with nothing to wipe it from my sight. Can hallucinations leave an afterimage? *Did the navigator* choose *to expose itself,* choose *to let me destroy it?*

I trip on something and stagger, but catch myself from falling. I turn and see a man crawling down the road, and I bring myself to a rapid halt, astonished by such a mundane sight after my transcendental encounter. The man's legs have been amputated at the thighs; he's dragging himself along with his arms alone. That would be hard enough in normal space, but here, the effort must almost be killing him.

There are special wheelchairs which can function in the wormhole (wheels bigger than a certain size buckle and deform if the chair stalls) and if we know we'll need one, we bring one in, but they're too heavy for every runner to carry one just in case.

The man lifts his head and yells, "Keep going! Stupid fucker!" without the least sign of doubt that he's not just shouting at empty space. I stare at him and wonder why I don't take the advice. He's huge: big-boned and heavily muscled, with plenty of fat on top of that. I doubt that I could

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lift him—and I'm certain that if I could, I'd stagger along more slowly than he's crawling.

Inspiration strikes. I'm in luck, too; a sideways glance reveals a house, with the front door invisible but clearly only a meter or two inward of where I am now. I smash the hinges with a hammer and chisel, then maneuver the door out of the frame and back to the road. The man has already caught up with me. I bend down and tap him on the shoulder. "Want to try sledding?"

I step inward in time to hear part of a string of obscenities, and to catch an unwelcome close-up of his bloody forearms. I throw the door down onto the road ahead of him. He keeps moving; I wait until he can hear me again.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes," he mutters.

It's awkward, but it works. He sits on the door, leaning back on his arms. I run behind, bent over, my hands on his shoulders, pushing. Pushing is the one action the wormhole doesn't fight, and the inward force makes it downhill all the way. Sometimes the door slides so fast that I have to let go for a second or two, to keep from overbalancing.

I don't need to look at the map. I *know* the map, I know precisely where we are; The Core is less than a hundred meters away. In my head I recite an incantation: *The danger does not increase. The danger does not increase.* And in my heart I know that the whole conceit of "probability" is meaningless; the wormhole is reading my mind, waiting for the first sign of hope, and whether that comes fifty meters, or ten meters, or two meters from safety, *that's* when it will take me.

Some part of me calmly judges the distance we cover, and counts: *Ninety-three, ninety-two, ninety-one* . . . I mumble random numbers to myself, and when that fails, I reset the count arbitrarily: *Eighty-one, eighty-seven, eighty-six, eighty-five, eighty-nine* . . .

A new universe, of light, stale air, noise—and people, *countless people*—explodes into being around me. I keep pushing the man on the door, until someone runs towards me and gently prizes me away. Elaine. She guides me over to the front steps of a house, while another Runner with a first-aid kit approaches my bloodied passenger. Groups of people stand or sit around electric lanterns, filling the streets and front yards as far as I can see. I point them out to Elaine. "Look. Aren't they beautiful?"

"John? You okay? Get your breath. It's over."

"Oh, fuck." I glance at my watch. "Twenty-one minutes. Forty-five percent." I laugh, hysterically. "I was afraid of 45 percent?"

My heart is working twice as hard as it needs to. I pace for a while, until the dizziness begins to subside. Then I flop down on the steps beside Elaine.

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A while later, I ask, "Any others still out there?"

"No."

"Great." I'm starting to feel almost lucid. "So . . . how did you do?"

She shrugs. "Okay. A sweet little girl. She's with her parents somewhere round here. No complications; favorable geometry." She shrugs again. Elaine is like that; favorable geometry or not, it's never a big deal.

I recount my own experience, leaving out the apparition. I should talk to the medical people first, straighten out what kind of hallucination is or isn't possible, before I start spreading the word that I took a pot shot at a glowing blue pipe organ from the future.

Anyway, if I did any good, I'll know soon enough. If The Intake *does* start drifting away from the planet, that shouldn't take long to make news; I have no idea at what rate the parting would take place, but surely the very next manifestation would be highly unlikely to be on the Earth's surface. Deep in the crust, or half-way into space—

I shake my head. There's no use building up my hopes, prematurely, when I'm still not sure that any of it was real.

Elaine says, "What?"

"Nothing."

I check the time again. Twenty-nine minutes. Thirty-three percent. I glance down the street impatiently. We can see out into the wormhole, of course, but the border is clearly delineated by the sudden drop in illumination, once outward-bound light can no longer penetrate. When The Intake moves on, though, it won't be a matter of looking for subtle shifts in the lighting. While the wormhole is in place, its effects violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics (biased thermal motion, for a start, clearly decreases entropy). In parting, it more than makes amends; it *radially homogenizes* the space it occupied, down to a length scale of about a micron. To the rock two hundred meters beneath us, and the atmosphere above—both already highly uniform—this will make little difference, but every house, every garden, every blade of grass—every structure visible to the naked eye—will vanish. Nothing will remain but radial streaks of fine dust, swirling out as the high-pressure air in The Core is finally free to escape.

Thirty-five minutes. Twenty-six percent. I look around at the weary survivors; even for those who left no family or friends behind, the sense of relief and thankfulness at having reached safety has no doubt faded. They—we—just want the waiting to be over. Everything about the passage of time, everything about the wormhole's uncertain duration, has reversed its significance. Yes, the thing might set us free at any moment—but so long as it hasn't, we're as likely as not to be stuck here for eighteen more minutes.

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Forty minutes. Twenty-one percent.

"Ears are really going to pop tonight," I say. Or worse; on rare occasions, the pressure in The Core can grow so high that the subsequent decompression gives rise to the bends. That's at least another hour away, though—and if it started to become a real possibility, they'd do an air drop of a drug that would cushion us from the effect.

Fifty minutes. Fifteen percent.

Everyone is silent now; even the children have stopped crying.

"What's your record?" I ask Elaine.

She rolls her eyes. "Fifty-six minutes. You were there. Four years ago."

"Yeah. I remember."

"Just relax. Be patient."

"Don't you feel a little silly? I mean, if I'd known, I would have taken my time."

One hour. Ten percent. Elaine has dozed off, her head against my shoulder. I'm starting to feel drowsy myself, but a nagging thought keeps me awake.

I've always assumed that the wormhole moves because its efforts to stay put eventually fail—but what if the truth is precisely the opposite? What if it moves because its efforts to move have always, eventually, succeeded? What if the navigator breaks away to try again, as quickly as it can—but its crippled machinery can do no better than a fifty-fifty chance of success, for every eighteen minutes of striving?

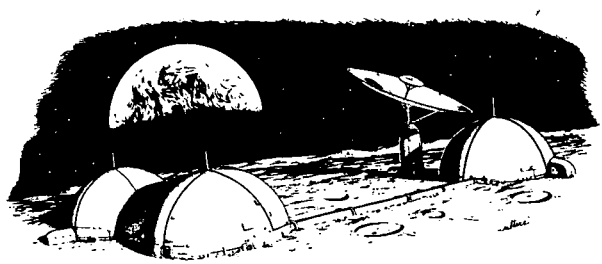
Maybe I've put an end to that striving. Maybe I've brought The Intake, finally, to rest.

Eventually, the pressure itself can grow high enough to be fatal. It takes almost five hours, it's a one-in-one-hundred-thousand case, but it has happened once already, there's no reason at all it couldn't happen again. That's what bothers me most: I'd never know. Even if I saw people dying around me, the moment would never arrive when I *knew*, for certain, that this was the final price.

Elaine stirs without opening her eyes. *"Still?"*

"Yeah." I put an arm around her; she doesn't seem to mind.

"Well. Don't forget to wake me when it's over." ●



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IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES

by Harry Turtledove

Harry Turtledove recently became a full-time freelance author. His latest projects include *Krispos of Videssos* (a fantasy for Del Rey that was published last August), *Earthgrip* (a science fiction novel just released by Del Rey and Easton Press), and *The Long Roll* (an alternate-history Civil War novel, due out from Crown Books sometime this year). He tells us he is particularly pleased about the publication of the following story because, "it hits me where I live in a lot of places."

Heinrich Gimpel glanced at the report on his desk to see again how many *Reichsmarks* the United States was being assessed for the *Wehrmacht* bases at New York, Chicago, and St. Louis. As he'd thought, the figures were up from those of 2009. Well, the Americans would pay—and in hard currency, too; none of their inflated dollars—or the panzer divisions would move out of those bases and collect what was owed the Germanic Empire. And if they collected some blood along with their pound of flesh, the prostrate U.S. was hardly in a position to complain.

Gimpel typed the new numbers into his computer, then saved the study on which he'd been working for the last couple of days. The Zeiss disk drive purred smoothly as it swallowed the data. He turned off the machine, then got up and put on his uniform greatcoat: in Berlin's early March, winter still outblustered spring.

"Let's call it a day, Heinrich," said Willi Dorsch, who shared the office with Gimpel. He shook his head as he donned his own greatcoat. "How long have you been here at *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* now?"

"Going on twelve years," Gimpel answered, buttoning buttons. "Why?"

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His friend cheerfully sank the barb: "All that time at the high command, and a fancy uniform, and you still don't look like a soldier."

"I can't help it," Gimpel said; he knew too well that Willi was right. A tall, thin, balding man in his early forties, he had a tendency to shamble instead of parading, and wore his greatcoat as if it were cut from the English tweeds some professors still affected. He tried to set his high-crowned cap at a rakish angle, raised an eyebrow to get Dorsch's reaction. Willi shook his head. Gimpel shrugged, spread his hands.

"I suppose I'll just have to be martial for both of us," Dorsch said. *His* cap gave him a fine dashing air. "Doing anything for dinner tonight?" The two men lived not far from each other.

"As a matter of fact, we are. I'm sorry. Lise invited a couple of friends over," Gimpel said. "Let's get together soon, though."

"We'd better," Dorsch said. "Erika's saying she misses you again. Me, I'm getting jealous."

"Oh, *quatsch,*" Gimpel said, using the pungent Berliner word for rubbish. "Maybe she needs her spectacles checked." Willi was blond and ruddy and muscular, none of which desirable adjectives applied to Gimpel. "Or maybe it's just my bridge game."

Dorsch winced. "You know how to hurt a man, don't you? Come on; let's go."

The wind outside the military headquarters had a bite to it. Gimpel shivered inside his overcoat. He pointed off to the left, toward the Great Hall. "The old-timers say the bulk of that thing has messed up our weather."

"Old-timers always complain," his friend answered. "That's what makes them old-timers." But Willi's gaze followed Gimpel's finger. He saw the Great Hall every day, but seldom really looked at it. "It's big, all right, but is it big enough for that? I doubt it." His voice, though, was doubtful, too.

"You ask me, it's big enough for damn near anything," Gimpel said. The Great Hall, built sixty years earlier in the great flush of triumph after Britain and Russia went down before the guns and tanks of the Third Reich, boasted a dome that reached over two hundred twenty meters into the sky and was more than two hundred fifty meters across: sixteen St. Peter's cathedrals might have fit within the enormous monument to the grandeur of the Aryan race. The wealth of a conquered continent had brought it into being.

The dome itself, sheathed in weathered copper, caught the fading light like a great green hill. Atop it, in place of a cross, stood a gilded Germanic eagle with a swastika in its claws. Atop the eagle, a red light blinked on and off to warn away low-flying planes.

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Willi Dorsch's shiver had only a little to do with the chilly weather. "It makes me feel tiny."

"It's a temple to the *Reich* and the *Volk*. It's supposed to make you feel tiny," Gimpel answered. "Set against the needs of the German race or the state, any one man is tiny."

"We serve them, not they us," Willi agreed. He pointed across the Adolf Hitler Platz toward the *Führer*'s palace on the far side of the immense square. "When Speer ran that one up, he was worried the size of the building would dwarf even our Leader himself." And indeed, the balcony above the tall entranceway looked like an architectural afterthought.

Gimpel's short laugh came out as a puff of steam. "Not even Speer could look ahead to see what technology might do for him."

"Better not let the Security Police hear you talk that way about one of the *Reichsvaters*." Dorsch tried to laugh, too, but his chuckle rang hollow. The Security Police had to be taken seriously.

Still, Gimpel was right. When the *Führer*'s palace was erected, another huge Germanic eagle had surmounted the balcony from which the Germanic Empire's leader might address his citizens. The eagle had been moved to its present position on the roof when Gimpel was a boy. In its place went an enormous televisor screen. Adolf Hitler Platz had been built to hold a million people. Now when the *Führer* spoke, every one of them could get a proper view.

A bus purred up to the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* building. Gimpel and Dorsch filed aboard with the rest of the officials who greased the operation of the mightiest military machine the world had known. One by one, the commuters stuck their account cards into the fare slot. The bus' computer debited each rider 85 *pfennigs*.

The bus rolled down the broad avenue toward South Station. Berlin's myriad bureaucrats made up the majority of the passengers, but not all. A fair number were tourists, come from all over the world to view the most wonderful and terrible boulevard that world boasted. Blasé as any native, Gimpel normally paid but scant attention to the marvels of his home town. Today, though, the oohs and ahhs of those seeing them for the first time made him notice them also.

Sentries from the *Grossdeutschland* division in ceremonial uniform goose-stepped outside their barracks. Tourists on the sidewalk took photos of the *Führer*'s guards. Inside the barracks hall, where tourists would not see them, were other troops in businesslike camouflage smocks, assault rifles in place of the ceremonial force's obsolete *Gewehr 98*s, and enough armored fighting vehicles to blast Berlin to rubble. Visitors from afar were not encouraged to think about them. Neither were most Berliners. But Gimpel reckoned up *Grossdeutschland*'s budget every spring. He knew exactly what the barracks held.

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Neon lights came on in front of theaters and restaurants as darkness deepened. Dark or light, people swarmed in and out of the huge Roman-style building that held a heated indoor pool the size of a young lake. It was open at all hours of the day and night for those who wished to exercise, to relax, or simply to ogle attractive members of the opposite sex. Its Berlin nickname was the *Heiratbad,* the marriage baths, sometimes amended by the cynical to the *Heiratbett,* the marriage bed.

Past the pool, the Soldiers' Hall and the Air and Space Ministry faced each other across the street. The Soldiers' Hall was a monument to the triumph of German arms. Among the exhibits it so lovingly preserved were the railroad car in which Germany had yielded to France in 1918 and France to Germany in 1940; the first Panzer IV to enter the Kremlin compound; one of the gliders which had landed paratroops in southern England; and, behind thick leaded glass, the twisted remains of the Liberty Bell, excavated by expendable prisoners from the ruins of Philadelphia.

Old people in Berlin still called the Air and Space Ministry the *Reichsmarschall*'s Office, in memory of Hermann Göring, the only man ever to hold that exalted rank. Willi Dorsch used its more common name when he nudged Gimpel and said, "I wonder what's happening in the Jungle these days."

"Could be anything," Gimpel answered. They both laughed. The roof of the ministry had been covered with four meters of earth, partly as a protection against aerial bombardment, and then planted, partly to please Göring's fancy (his private apartment was on the top floor). The old *Reichsmarschall* was almost half a century dead, but the orgies he'd put on amidst the greenery remained a Berlin legend.

Willi said, "We aren't the men our grandfathers were. In those days they thought big and weren't ashamed to be flamboyant." He sighed the sigh of a man denied great deeds by the time in which he chanced to live.

"Poor us, doomed to get by on matter-of-fact competence," Gimpel said. "The skills we need to run our empire are different from those Hitler's generation used to conquer it."

"I suppose so." Dorsch clicked his tongue between his teeth. "I envy you your contentment here and now, Heinrich. I almost joined the *Wehrmacht* when I was just out of the *Hitler Jugend.* Sometimes I still think I should have. There's a difference between this uniform" —he ran a hand down his double-breasted greatcoat—"and the one real soldiers wear."

"Is that your heart talking, or did you just all of a sudden remember you're not eighteen years old any more?" Gimpel said. His friend winced, acknowledging the hit. He went on, "Me, I'd fight if the Fatherland needed me, but I'm just as glad not to be carrying a gun."

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"We're all probably safer because you don't," Dorsch said.

"This is also true." Gimpel took off his thick, gold-framed glasses. In an instant, the street outside, the interior of the bus, even Willi beside him, grew blurry and indistinct. He blinked a couple of times, returned the glasses to the bridge of his nose. The world regained its sharp edges.

The neon brilliance of the street outside dimmed as the bus passed by the theaters and started picking up passengers from the ministries of the Interior, Transportation, Economics, and Food. *More uniforms that don't belong to Germans in them,* Gimpel thought. The buildings from which the new people were shutting down for the day.

Two of those ministries, though, like the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht,* never slept. A new shift went into the Justice Ministry to replace the workers who left. German justice could not close its eyes, and woe betide the criminal or racial mongrel upon whom their omniscient gaze lighted. Himmler was a thoroughly law-abiding man, Gimpel still shivered a little every time he passed that marble-fronted hall.

The Colonial Ministry was similarly active. Much of the world, these days, fell under its purview: the agricultural towns of the Ukraine, the mining colonies in central Africa, the Indian tea plantations, the cattle herders on the plains of North America. As if picking that last thought from Gimpel's mind, Willi Dorsch said, "How many Americans does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"The Americans have always been in the dark," Gimpel answered. He clucked sadly. "Your father was telling that one, Willi."

"If he was, he sounded more relieved than I do. The Yankees might have been tough."

"Might-have-beens don't count, fortunately." Isolation and neutrality had kept the United States from paying heed as potential allies in Europe went down one after another. It faced the Germanic Empire and Japan alone a generation later—and its oceans were not wide enough to shield it from robot bombs.

Just ahead lay another monument to German victory: Hitler's Arch of Triumph. Gimpel had been to Paris on holiday and seen the Arc de Triomphe at the end of the Champs Elysées. It served as a model for Berlin's arch, and was a model in scale as well. The Arc de Triomphe was only about fifty meters tall, less than half the height of its enormous successor. The Berlin arch was almost a hundred seventy meters wide and also a hundred seventeen meters deep, so that the bus spent a good long while under it, as if traversing a tunnel through a hillside.

When at last it emerged, South Station lay not far ahead. The station building made an interesting contrast to the monumental stone piles that filled the rest of the avenue. Its exterior was copper sheeting and

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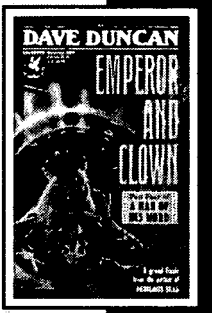

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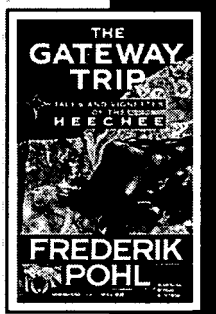

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glass, giving the traveler a glimpse of the steel ribs that formed its skeleton.

The bus stopped at the edge of the station plaza. Along with everyone else, Gimpel and Dorsch filed off and hurried across the plaza toward the waiting banks of elevators and escalators. They walked between more displays of weapons which had belonged to Germany's fallen foes: the wreckage of a British fighter, carefully preserved inside a lucite cube; a formidable-looking Russian tank; the conning tower of an American submarine.

"Into the bowels of the earth," Dorsch murmured as he reached out to grab the escalator handrail. The train to Stahnsdorf boarded on the lowest of the station's four levels.

Signs and arrows and endless announcements over the loudspeaker system should have made it impossible for anyone to get lost in the railway station. Gimpel and Dorsch found their way to their commuter train almost without conscious thought. So did most Berliners. The swarms of tourists, however, were grit in the smooth machine. Uniformed youths and maids from the *Hitler Jugend* helped those for whom even the clearest instructions were not clear enough.

Even so, the natives grumbled when foreigners got in their way. Dodging around an excited Italian who had dropped his cheap suitcase so he could use both hands to gesture at a Hitler Youth in brown shirt, swastika armband, and *lederhosen,* Dorsch growled, "People like that deserve to be sent to the shower."

"Oh, come on, Willi, let him live," Gimpel answered mildly.

"You're too soft, Heinrich," his friend said. But then they rounded the last corner and came to their waiting area. Dorsch looked at the schedule board on the wall, then at his watch. "Five minutes till the next one. Not bad."

"No," Gimpel said. The train pulled into the station within thirty seconds of its appointed time. Gimpel thought nothing of it as he followed Dorsch into a car; he noticed only the very rare instances when it was late. As the two men had in the bus, they put their account cards into the fare slot and then took their seats. As soon as the computer's count of fares matched the car's capacity, the doors hissed shut. Three more cars filled behind them. Acceleration pressed Gimpel back against the synthetic fabric of his chair as the train began to move.

Twenty minutes later, the engineer's voice came over the roof-mounted speakers: "Stahnsdorf! All out for Stahnsdorf!"

Gimpel and Dorsch were standing in front of the doors when they hissed open again. The two commuters hopped off and hurried through the little suburban station to the bus stop outside. Another five minutes and Dorsch got up from the local bus. "See you tomorrow, Heinrich."

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"Say hello to Erika for me."

"I'm not sure I ought to," Willi said. Both men laughed. Dorsch got off the bus and trotted toward his house, which was three doors down from the corner.

Gimpel rode for another few stops, then descended himself. His own house lay at the end of a cul-de-sac, so he had to walk for a whole block. *It's healthy for me,* he told himself, a consolation easier to enjoy in spring and summer than in winter.

The *snick* of his key going into the lock brought shouts of "Daddy!" from inside the house. He smiled, opened the door, and picked up each of his three girls in turn for a hug and a kiss: they ranged down in age from ten by two-year steps.

Then he lifted his wife as well. Lise Gimpel squawked; that was not part of the evening ritual. The girls giggled. "Put me down!" Lise said indignantly.

"Not till I get my kiss."

She made as if to bite his nose instead, but then let him kiss her. He set her feet back on the carpet, held her a little longer before he let her go. She was a pleasant armful, a green-eyed brunette several years younger than he who had kept her figure very well. When he released her, she hurried back toward the kitchen. "I want to finish cooking before everyone gets here."

"All right," he said, smiling as he watched her retreat. While he hung up his greatcoat and took off his tie, his daughters regaled him with tales out of school. He listened to three simultaneous stories as best he could. Lise came out again long enough to hand him a goblet of liebfraumilch, then started away.

The chimes rang before she got out of the front room. She whirled, stared indignantly at the door. "I am going to boot Susanna right into the net," she declared.

Gimpel looked at his watch. "She's only ten minutes early this time. And you know she's always early, so you should have been ready."

"Hmp," Lise said while he went to let in their friend. Meanwhile, the girls started chorusing, "Susanna is a football! Aunt Susanna is a football!"

"Heinrich, why are they calling me a football?" Susanna Weiss demanded. She craned her neck to look up at him. "I'm short, yes, and I'm not emaciated like you, but I'm not round, either." She shrugged out of a mink jacket, thrust it into his hands. "Here, see to this."

Chuckling, he clicked his heels. "*Jawohl, meine Dame.*"

She accepted the deference as no less than her due. "*Fräulein Doktor Professor* will suffice, thank you." She taught medieval English literature at Humboldt University. Suddenly she abandoned her imperial

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manner and started to laugh, too. "Now that you've hung that up, how about a hug?"

"Lise's not watching. I suppose I can get away with that." He put his arms around her. She barely reached his shoulder, but her vitality more than made up for lack of size. When he let go, he said, "Why don't you go into the kitchen? You can pretend to help Lise while you soak up our Glenfyddich."

"Scotch almost justifies the existence of Scotland," she said. "It's a cold, gloomy, rocky place, so they had to make something nice to keep themselves warm."

"If that's why people drink it, your boyfriend is lucky he didn't set himself on fire here a couple of years ago."

"My *former* boyfriend, *danken Gott dafür,*" Susanna said. All the same, she blushed to the roots of her hair; her skin was very fine and fair, which let him watch the blush advance from her throat. "I didn't know he was a drunk, Heinrich."

"I know," he said gently. If he teased her too far, she'd lose her temper, and nothing and nobody was safe if that happened. "Go on; Lise's trying that recipe you sent her."

The girls waylaid Susanna before she made it to the kitchen. Though she'd never been married, she made an excellent ersatz aunt; she took children seriously, listened to what they had to say, and treated them like small adults. Gimpel smiled. Come to that, she was a small adult herself. He knew better than to say so out loud.

Walther and Esther Stutzman arrived a few minutes later, along with their son Gottlieb and daughter Anna. Anna promptly went off with the Gimpel girls; she was a year older than Alicia, the eldest of the three. Heinrich Gimpel stared at Gottlieb. "Good heavens, is that a mustache?"

The younger male Stutzman touched a finger to the space between his upper lip and his nose. "It's going to be one, I hope." At the moment, the growth was hard to see. For one thing, he had only just turned sixteen. For another, his hair was even fairer than his father's. And for a third, he'd chosen to keep untrimmed only a toothbrush mustache; the first *Führer*'s style was newly popular again.

Walther Stutzman differed from his son in appearance only by the presence of twenty-odd years and the absence of any vestiges of a mustache. As he handed Gimpel his topcoat, he asked quietly, "Tonight?"

"Yes, I think Alicia's ready," Gimpel answered, as quietly. "I told her she could stay up late. How has Anna done, the past year?"

"Well enough," her father said.

"We're still here, after all," Esther Stutzman put in. A slim woman with light brown hair, she peered at Gimpel through glasses thicker than

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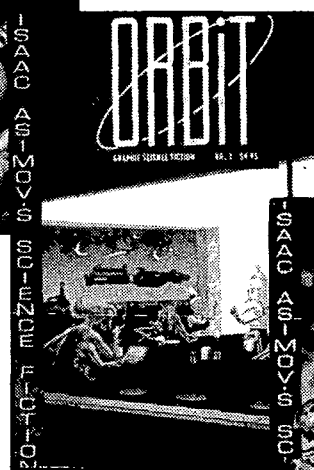

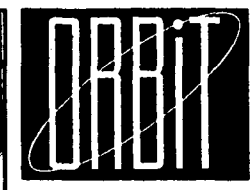

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his own. Somehow, in spite of everything, her laugh managed to hold real mirth. "And if she hadn't done well, we assuredly wouldn't be."

"Wouldn't be what, Aunt Esther?" Alicia Gimpel asked, a doll under one arm.

"Wouldn't be standing out here in the hall talking if we expected the curly-haired *Gestapo* to be listening in," Esther said. Her grin took all sting from the words.

Imitating her father, Alicia said, "Oh, *quatsch!*" Anna Stutzman tried to sneak up behind her, but she whirled before she got tickled. Both girls squealed. They ran off together, Alicia's brown curls bobbing beside Anna's blonde ones. They were very much of a height; though Anna was a year older, Alicia was tall for her age.

"Dinner!" Lise called from the kitchen. Everyone went into the dining room. Heinrich Gimpel and Anna's brother Gottlieb dropped the leaves on the table to accommodate the unusual crowd. Walther, meanwhile, fetched in a couple of extra chairs, while Susanna Weiss arranged them around the table.

They all paused to admire the fragrantly steaming pork roast before Gimpel attacked it with fork and carving knife. With onions, potatoes, and boiled parsnips, it made a feast to fight the chill outside and leave everyone happily replete. Most of the talk that punctuated the music of knife and fork was praise for Lise's cooking.

Smooth wheat beer mixed with raspberry syrup accompanied the meal. The two younger Gimpel girls, who usually were allowed only small glasses, got grownup-sized mugs. They proudly drained them dry, and were nodding by the time their mother brought out dessert. They munched their way through the little cakes stuffed with prunes or apricots or mildly sweet chocolate, but the filling sweets only made them sleepier. The food slowed Alicia down too, but she was buoyed by the prospect of sitting up and talking with the adults.

Seeing her daughter's excitement, Lise Gimpel said, "She doesn't know yet how boring we can be, with our chatter of children and taxes and work and who's going to bed with whom."

"Who *is* going to bed with whom?" Esther asked. "It's more interesting than taxes and work, that's for certain."

Susanna parodied a *Hitler Jugend* song: "In the fields and on the heath, we lose strength through joy!" Gottlieb Stutzman blushed almost as red as she had before. Teasing him, she said, "Why, Gottlieb, don't you hope to meet a friendly maiden when you go to work your year in the fields?"

"It is not practical, not for me," he answered stiffly, rubbing a finger over his peach-fuzz mustache.

"It is not practical for any of us, as Susanna knows." Walther Stutzman

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gave her a severe look. "It is also not practical for us to sing that song anywhere but among ourselves. If the Security Police hear it—"

"It's wiser not to draw the attention of the Security Police in any case," Lise Gimpel said with her usual solid good sense. "Even children know that." She looked at her own two younger children, who were valiantly trying not to yawn. "After I get the table cleared away, time for the little ones to go to bed."

Heinrich Gimpel nodded to Walther and Gottlieb Stutzman. "Nice to have some other men in the house for a change," he said.

"You are outnumbered, aren't you?" Walther said. "Me, I kept the numbers even. But then, that's what they pay me for." He had a moderately important post with the computer design team at Zeiss.

Everyone, even the men, pitched in to help Lise cart dirty dishes and leftovers (not that there were many of those) back to the kitchen. The two younger Gimpel girls took off their party dresses and put on long cotton nightgowns. They collected kisses from the grownups, then went off to their bedroom—not without a couple of sleepily envious glances at Alicia, who got to stay up.

Alicia herself looked curious and excited. She sat on the edge of the couch, her eyes now on her parents, now on Susanna or Esther or Walther or Gottlieb. As Lise Gimpel had said, her eldest daughter didn't know what the grownups talked about after she went to sleep, and could hardly wait to learn.

Her gaze swung to her friend Anna. "You've found out what the secret is," she said accusingly.

"Yes, I have." Anna sounded so serious that Heinrich Gimpel's heart went out to her. Alicia, though, put on what he thought of as her Angry Face. Anna also saw that. Quickly, she added, "After tonight, you'll know, too."

"All right," Alicia said, part way mollified. Then she said, "Why are all of you staring at me like that? I don't like it!" She twisted around to bury her face against a sofa pillow.

"It's an important secret, dear," her mother answered. "Come out, please. It's such an important secret, you can't even tell it to your sisters."

That got through to Alicia. Heinrich saw her eyes go wide. He said, "You can't tell it to anybody at all. We waited until you were old enough so we could tell you, because we wanted to be sure" —*as sure as we could be,* he glossed mentally—"you wouldn't give us away by telling someone you shouldn't."

"I've known for a year now," Anna said to Alicia, "and I didn't even tell *you*. See how important it is?" Hearing the pride in her voice, Gimpel glanced over to Esther and Walther. They looked proud, too—proud and

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frightened. The fear never went away, though showing it anywhere in public was also dangerous.

"What is it, then?" Alicia said. "You're right, Anna; I never knew you had a secret, and I'm your best friend." She sounded hurt, but only a little: her time to learn had come. She repeated, "What is it?"

Heinrich and Lise did not answer, not right away. Now that the moment was here, all the gentle introductions they had planned seemed worthless. Yet coming right out and saying what had to be said—that, Gimpel feared, was likelier to horrify Alicia than to enlighten her. While they hesitated, Susanna Weiss did the job with one blunt sentence: "You are a Jew, Alicia."

The girl stared, then shook her head, as if at a joke. "Don't be silly, Aunt Susanna. There are no more Jews, not anywhere. They're *kaput* —finished." She spoke with the assurance of one reciting a lesson well learned in school.

Heinrich Gimpel shook his head too, to contradict her. "You *are* a Jew, Alicia. Your sisters are Jews, too. So is Susanna. So are Esther and Walther and Gottlieb and Anna. And so are your mother and I."

The color slowly drained from Alicia's cheeks as she realized her father meant what he said. "But—but," she faltered, and then rallied: "But Jews were filthy and wicked and diseased and racially impure." All the textbook lessons; Heinrich remembered how he had learned them, too. Perhaps trying to convince herself, Alicia went on, "That's why the wise *Reich* got rid of them. That's what my teacher says."

"One of the hardest lessons anyone learns is that not everything your teacher tells you is true," Walther Stutzman said. "For us, it's doubly hard."

"Is Anna filthy?" Lise Gimpel asked.

"Of course not," Alicia said indignantly. She looked to her friend as if wanting Anna to tell her this was all just a game. But Anna looked back with impressively adult solemnity; she knew what rode on holding this secret close.

"Are your father and I wicked?" Lise persisted. "Is Susanna diseased?"

"I can get to feel that way, the morning after too much Scotch," Susanna said.

"Hush, Susanna," Lise said.

"But—what happens if anyone else finds out I'm—I'm a Jew?" Alicia said. She pronounced the name with difficulty; it was too strong a curse to find in the mouth of a well-brought-up ten-year-old. "If my friends at school know, they won't like me any more."

"It will be worse than that, dear, if your friends at school find out," Heinrich Gimpel said. "If anyone learns you're a Jew, the *Einsatzkommandos* will come for you, and for your sisters, and for your mother and

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me, and for the Stutzmans, and for Susanna." He made his voice hard and implacable, impressing on his daughter that he meant exactly what he said.

Lise tried to soothe Alicia: "No one has to find out, my little one. No one will, unless you give yourself away, and us with you. We are well hidden these days, those few of us who are left." Even her sunny spirit was not proof against the memory of the millions who had died, first in Europe and then, a generation later, in the *Vernichtungslagers* outside New York and Los Angeles. Shaking her head, she repeated, "We are well hidden."

"My father helped there," Walther said. "He altered the *Reichs* genealogical data base to show us all to be of pure Aryan blood. No one looks for us any more, not here in the heart of the Germanic Empire. No one thinks there is any reason to look. We are safe enough, unless we give ourselves away. One day, maybe, not in our time but when your sons or grandsons have grown up, Alicia, it may be safe for us to live openly as what we are once more. Till then, we go on."

Alicia tossed her head wildly back and forth; her eyes were wide and staring, like those of a trapped animal. "It will never be safe! Never! The *Reich* will last for a thousand years, and how can there be room in it for Jews?"

"Maybe the *Reich* will last a thousand years, as Hitler promised," Heinrich said. "No one can know that until it happens, if it does. But there have been Jews, Alicia, for close to three thousand years already. Even if the Germanic Empire lives out its whole time, it will still be a baby beside us. One way or another, as Uncle Walther said, we go on. It's hard to pretend not to be what we really are—"

"I hate it," Susanna Weiss broke in.

"We all hate it," Gimpel continued. "But when times are dangerous for Jews, as they are now, what other choice do we have?"

"This isn't the first time Jews have had to be what they are only in secret," Esther Stutzman said. "In Spain a long time ago, we pretended to be good Catholics. Now we have to pretend to be good National Socialists. But underneath, we still are what we are."

"I don't want to be a Jew!" Alicia shouted, so loud that Heinrich looked nervously toward the windows. If one of the neighbors heard, the Security Police were only a phone call away.

He took a deep breath. "You have a way out, Alicia." She stared at him, tears and questions in her eyes. He said, "You can just pretend this night never happened. You know we will never betray you, no matter what you decide. If you choose not to tell your husband one day, if he is not one of us, and if you choose not to tell your children, they will never know you—and they—are Jewish. They'll be just like everyone else in

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the Germanic Empire. But one more piece of something old and precious will have gone out of the world forever."

"I don't know what to do," Alicia said, the most adult sentence that had ever crossed her lips.

"It's not so bad, Alicia," Anna Stutzman said. "I cried too, when I found out—"

"So did I," Gottlieb added, which made Alicia's eyes widen; he was so much older than she that she thought of him as practically a grown-up.

Anna went on, "But it's special in a way, like being part of a club that won't take just anybody. And it's not like what we are is written on our foreheads or anything like that, even though it does feel that way at first. But if we keep the secret, no one will find out what we are. We even have our own special holidays—today is one."

"What's today?" Alicia asked.

"Today is the festival of Purim," her father answered. "The Germans and the Spaniards Aunt Esther was talking about were not the first people to want to get rid of the Jews. We've always stood out a little because we're different from the other people in a country. And a long time ago, in the Persian Empire—"

He got out the Bible to help tell Alicia the story. It had both Old and New Testaments, of course; keeping one that didn't would have been suicidally dangerous. Having a Bible at all entailed a certain small risk, although the National Socialists, having won their wars, were more inclined to tolerate quiet Christianity these days.

"And so," Heinrich finished, "king Ahashuerus hanged Haman on the very gallows he had built for Mordechai, and Mordechai and Queen Esther lived long, happy, rich lives afterward." Alicia, caught up in spite of herself by the ancient tale, laughed and clapped her hands.

Very softly, Susanna Weiss said, "I wish someone had built a gallows for Hitler and Himmler. So many of our people gone—" She stared down into her snifter of Scotch. Sometimes Gimpel thought she felt guilty for living on where millions had died.

"I wish I could tell my sisters," Alicia said.

Walther Stutzman grinned at Heinrich, who smiled back. The year before, Anna had said, *I wish I could tell Alicia.* Gimpel knew more than a little relief that his daughter was beginning to adjust to new and shocking knowledge; he remembered his own confusion when he'd learned of his heritage.

But what Alicia had just said was also dangerous. He told her, "You can't tell them yet—they're too little. They'll learn when their time comes, just as you have now. But if the secret reaches the wrong ears, we're all dead. Just because there aren't many Jews left doesn't mean people have stopped hunting us. We're still fair game."

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"Are—we—the people in this room—are we all the Jews who are left?" Alicia asked.

"No," her father said. "There are others, all through Greater Germany and the rest of the Empire. In time you'll meet more, and some may startle you. But for now, the fewer Jews you know, the fewer you can give away if—if the worst happens."

Alicia's eyes went far away. Gimpel knew what she was doing: thinking about family friends and wondering which were of her own sort. He'd done the same thing himself. Finding out about Walther Stutzman had been his biggest surprise. The Stutzmans looked like perfect Aryans, and, a generation before, much had been made of Jews' allegedly grotesque features.

Lise said, "Even though we have our own holidays, Alicia, we can only celebrate them among ourselves. The little three-cornered cakes we had tonight are special for Purim—they're called *Hamantaschen*, Haman's hats."

"I like that," Alicia said. "Serves him right."

"Yes," Lise said, "but that's why you won't be carrying any of them to school for lunch. People who aren't Jewish might recognize them for what they are. We can't afford to take any chances at all, do you see?"

"Not even with anything as little as cakes?" Alicia exclaimed.

"Not even," Lise said. "Not with anything, not ever."

"All right, mama." The warning about *Hamantaschen* seemed to have impressed Alicia about the depth of the precautions she'd have to take to survive. Gimpel was glad something had. His own father had shown him photographs smuggled out of the *Ostlands* to warn him how necessary silence was. He still had nightmares about those pictures after more than thirty years. But he still had the photos, too, hidden in a file cabinet. If he thought he had to, he'd show them to Alicia. He hoped the need would not arise, for her sake and his own.

"*Is* it all right, Alicia?" he asked her. "I know this is a lot to put on a little girl, but we have to, you see, or there won't be any Jews at all any more."

"It's all right, father, it really is," she answered. "It—surprised me. I don't really know if I like it yet, but it's all right." She nodded in a slow, hesitant way that said she thought she meant it but wasn't quite sure.

That sufficed for Heinrich Gimpel. Finding out you were a Jew in the heart of the National Socialist Germanic Empire was not something anyone, child or adult, could fully take in at a moment's notice. A beginning of acceptance was as much as he could hope for. Alicia had given him that.

His daughter and Anna Stutzman yawned together, then giggled at each other. Susanna Weiss got up, grabbed her handbag, walked over to

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Alicia and kissed her on the cheek. "Welcome to your bigger family, dear. We're glad to have you." She turned to Heinrich. "I'd better get home. I have an early class tomorrow morning."

"We ought to go, too," Esther Stutzman said. "Either that or we'll wait till Anna falls asleep—which shouldn't be more than about another thirty seconds—and bundle her into the broom closet." Her daughter let out an indignant sniff.

Lise and Heinrich passed out coats. The friends stood gossiping on the front porch for a last couple of minutes. As they chattered, a brightly lit police van rolled by. Alicia gasped in horror and tried to bolt inside. Her father held her arm until the van turned a corner and disappeared. "Everything's fine, little one," he said. "They know of us only if we give ourselves away. Do you understand?"

"I—think so, father."

"Good."

The Stutzmans and Susanna walked off toward the bus stop. The Gimpels went back inside. Lise went with Alicia to get her ready for bed. Heinrich rinsed off the dishes and started loading them into the washer. He was still busy when Alicia came out for a goodnight kiss. Usually that was just part of night-time routine; tonight it felt special.

He said, "You don't have to be frightened every second, darling. If you show you're afraid, people will start to wonder what you have to be afraid of. Keep on being your own sweet self and no one will ever suspect a thing."

"I'll try, papa." When she hugged him, she clung for a few extra seconds. He squeezed her, then ran his hand through her hair. "Good night," she said, and hurried away.

Lise walked into the kitchen a couple of minutes later. She dragged in a chair from the dining room, sat down and waited till the sink was empty and the washer full. Then, as the machine started to churn, she got up and gave him a long, slow hug. "And so the tale gets told once more," she said.

As he had with his daughter, Heinrich held onto his wife. "And so we try to go on for another generation," he said. "We've outlasted so much. God willing, we'll outlast the Nazis, too."

"And, of course, now that the tale is told, the risk we'll get caught also goes up," Lise said. "You did well there, keeping her from running from the police van."

"Couldn't have that," Gimpel agreed. "But she'll be nervous for a while now, and she's so young—" He shook his head. "Strange how our greatest danger lies in making sure our kind goes on. No one would ever suspect you or me—"

"Why else buy pork?"

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"I know." Gimpel took off his glasses, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, set the spectacles back on his nose. "Why else do all the other things we do to seem like perfect Germans? I can quote *Mein Kampf* more easily than Scripture. But it's not so easy for a child. And we have two more yet to go." He let out a long, worn sigh, hugged Lise again. "I'm so tired."

"I know," she said. "It's easier for me, staying home with the *Kinder* like a proper *Hausfrau.* But you have to wear the mask every day at your office."

"It's either pretend to others I'm not a Jew or pack it in and pretend the same thing to myself. I'm not ready for that. I remember too well." He thought again of the hidden, yellowing photographs from the east. "We *will* go on, in spite of everything."

Lise yawned. "Right now, I think I'm going on to bed."

"I'm right behind you. Oh—speaking of the office, on the way home today Willi said he admired how content I was here and now."

"Good," Lise said at once. "If you must wear the mask, wear it well."

"I suppose so. He also asked if we were busy tonight. I told him yes, since we were, but we'll be going over there one evening soon."

"I'll arrange for my sister to stay with the girls," Lise said. "Let's give Alicia a little more time to get used to things before we take her out."

"Sensible. You generally are, though."

"Ha!" Lise said darkly. "I'd better be. So had you."

"I know." He chuckled. "Besides, with the girls at home we'll be able to play more bridge."

"That's true." Lise also laughed. Both of them, by now, were long used to the strangeness of having good friends who, if they knew the truth, might well want to send them to an extermination camp. Heinrich *was* looking forward to getting together with Willi and Erika Dorsch for an evening of talk and bridge: within the limits of his upbringing, Willi was a good fellow.

Gimpel pondered the limits of his own upbringing, which were a good deal narrower than Willi Dorsch's. In one way, telling Alicia of her heritage was transcending those limits. In another, it was forcing them on her as well. In still another—he gave up the regress before he got lost in it. "Didn't you say something about bed?"

"You're the one who's been standing here talking," Lise said.

"Let's go."●

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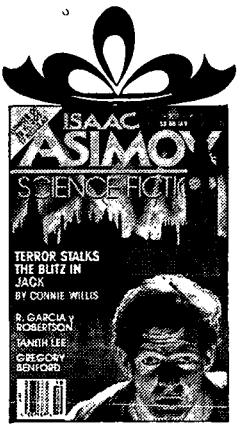

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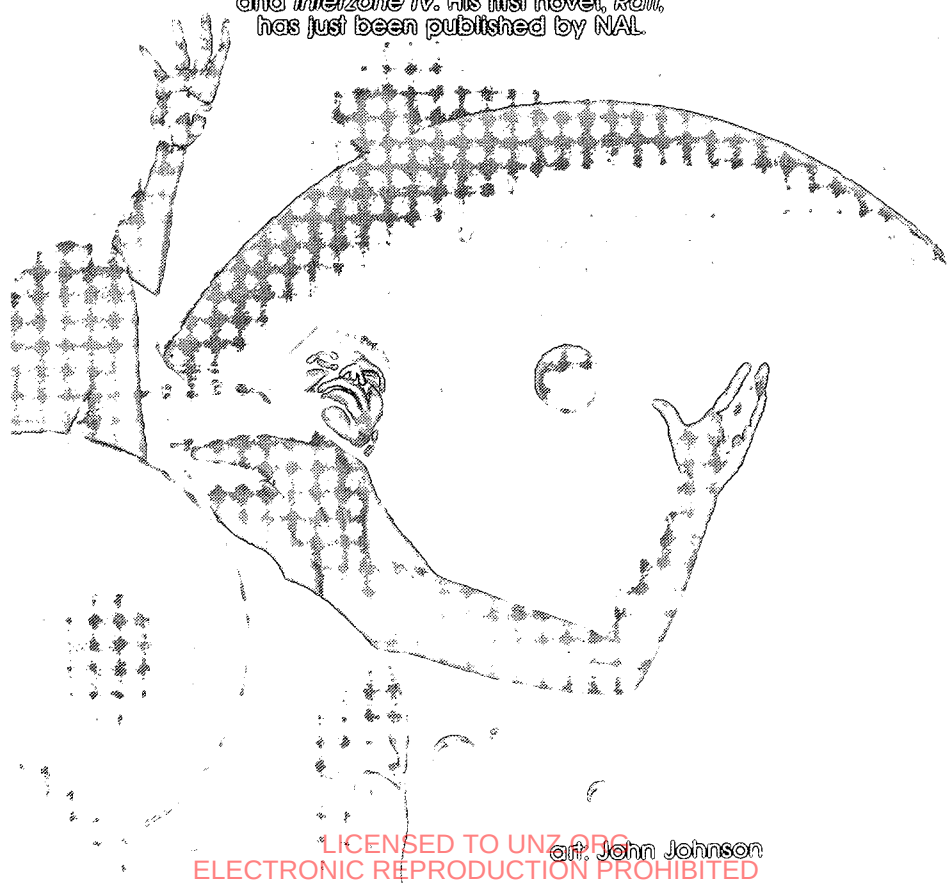
PLANCK ZERO

by Stephen Baxter

"Planck Zero" is English author Stephen Baxter's first tale for *IAsfm*. While this certifiably hard SF story stands alone, it is part of his "Xeelee Sequence" of tales. Mr. Baxter's fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Other Edens II*, *Zenith III*, and *Interzone IV*. His first novel, *Raft*, has just been published by NAL.



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Recently I've been poring over theoretical physics texts. My friends—those who can still stand to see me, since the Ghosts rebuilt me—can't understand it. Okay, they say, you were almost killed by the Ghosts' Planck-zero experiment. It was terrible. But isn't it all over now? Why brood? Why not walk—or rather, fly—out into the sunshine, and enjoy what's left of your life?

. . . But I have to do this. I need the answer to a specific question.

Is there any way out of a black hole?

When I heard of the Ghosts' experiment I raised hell. Eventually their Sink Ambassador agreed to meet me, but they insisted the venue had to be the exposed surface of the Moon. Earth conditions wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference to a Silver Ghost, of course; it was all part of the Ghosts' endless diplomatic gavotte. I found it irritating as hell. But, as a chief administrator of the Ghost liaison project, it was my precise job not to find such matters irritating.

I guess age—and Eve's death—were making it harder for me to stomach the pettiness of interspecial diplomacy.

What the hell. I rode the Lunar Cable out from Antarctic Station. We were to meet outside Copernicus Dome; I suited up and walked out briskly. If the Ambassador had been hoping that my sixty-five years would keep me at home it had another think coming.

The Silver Ghosts' Ambassador to the Heat Sink was a five-foot silvered sphere. It floated a yard off the lunar regolith; the reflection of Earth was a distorted crescent sliding over its midriff.

We met without aides, as I'd requested, and spoke on a closed channel.

I came straight to the point. "Ambassador, I've asked to meet you because we suspect you are conducting unauthorized experiments on quagma material."

It bobbed up and down, a child's balloon incongruously dispatched to the airless Moon. "Unauthorized? You have no authority over our activities."

"Oh, yes, we do. By force of treaty we have the right of inspection of any quagma-related project you run. Just as you have reciprocal rights over us."

It hesitated. "Jack, I would like to see evidence to support your allegation."

I was prepared for that. "I'll download the dossier to you. As soon as I'm satisfied you are being just as honest with me."

I tried to read the thin tones of the translator chips. "Perhaps you are speculating. Perhaps this is a—" Pause. "—a shot in the dark? You are trying to extract valuable information from me on the threat of evidence which does not exist."

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I shook my head. "Ambassador, think it over. Your race and mine have contacts at many levels, right down to the one-man traders. Security measures between our species are as porous as human flesh." A charming Ghost simile.

"Perhaps." Its bobbing evolved into a complex shimmering. "Very well. Jack Raoul, we have grown to know each other, these past decades, and I am aware that you are an honest man . . . if not always an open one, despite your present posture as an injured party. Therefore I must accept that you have such evidence."

I felt a surge of satisfaction. "Then you are conducting a covert project."

"Covert, perhaps, but not intentionally so from our human partners."

"Oh, really . . . ?" I let it pass. "Then from whom?"

"The Xeelee."

My breath caught in my throat.

Humanity—and the Silver Ghosts, and a host of other spacefaring species—have perforce grown accustomed to the aloof gaze of the Xeelee, and their occasional devastating intervention in our affairs. For example, fifty years ago the Xeelee disrupted the Ghost and human expeditions which crossed the universe in search of a relic of the Big Bang—a fragment of primordial quagma.

Some believe the Xeelee are trying to maintain their monopoly on power—which holds sway across the observable universe. Others say that There Are Things We Are Not Meant To Know and, like the vengeful gods of man's childhood, the Xeelee are protecting us from ourselves.

I'm not sure which interpretation I find more insulting.

I studied the Ambassador with a sneaking admiration. "I'll be impressed if you manage to keep secrets from the Xeelee. How are you doing it?"

The Ghost began to roll gently. "All in good time, Mr. Raoul. We cannot be sure of secure communications, even here."

"This conversation has served its purpose, then. Our staff can proceed with the details—"

"But we would not allow the dissemination of any data. Only an inspection tour, at the highest level, would be acceptable."

"The highest level?"

"Perhaps you would care to visit the site yourself, Jack Raoul."

I laughed. "Perhaps . . . when I find out what the catch is."

The rolling accelerated. "We know each other too well. Jack, we would have to rebuild you."

There was no inflection in the artificial voice. The image of Earth rippled across Ghost skin.

I shivered.

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"Ambassador, just give me one hint. You know I'm an inquisitive man."

"A hint?"

"What are you trying to do, with your quagma?"

The rolling stopped. "You have heard of the Uncertainty Principle . . . ?"

"Of course."

"We have violated it."

We'd owned an apartment at the heart of the New Bronx. It was a nice place, big and roomy with powerful Virtual walls. The fruit of two successful careers. Now it was too big for me, but I'd kept it unchanged since Eve's death.

When I got back after my meeting with the Ambassador I poured myself a malt, slumped on my favorite couch, and called up Eve.

One wall melted. Eve was sitting on a couch like mine—heartbreakingly real, at least when she didn't move and the image stayed stable.

She looked around quickly, as if establishing where she was, then fixed me with an admonishing stare.

"You're looking good," I said, raising my glass.

She snorted, but pushed a hand through her greyed hair. "What do you want, Jack? You know this is bad for you."

"I want you to tell me about the Uncertainty Principle."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later."

She frowned. "The walls have plenty of popular science texts—"

"You know I can never understand a word of that stuff unless you explain it to me."

"For Christ's sake, Jack; that's just sentimental—"

"Humor me. It's important."

She sighed and pulled at a stray lock of hair—a gesture she'd used since girlhood. "All right, damn it. But I'll keep it brief; and when it's over, that's it."

"It's a deal."

Now Eve changed, subtly, so that—without any obvious reworking of the image—she seemed younger, more comfortable on the couch. I guessed the wall was accessing an older part of her Notebooks. "To understand Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle," she began, "you need to get a handle on quantum mechanics."

According to the quantum philosophy, particles like electrons don't exist as points of mass and charge. Instead each electron has a wave function which describes its position, velocity, and other properties; it's

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as if the electron is spread over a small volume of space delimited by the wave-function.

"So where does the Uncertainty Principle come in?"

Eve twisted my ring around her finger. "You can reduce the spread of an electron's position wave-volume—perhaps by inspecting it using very high frequency photons. But the catch is that the wave-volume associated with another variable—the electron's momentum—expands enormously. And vice versa.

"So you can never know both the electron's position and momentum; you can never reduce both wave-volumes to zero."

"Okay. What's the size of these volumes?"

"The scale is given by Planck's constant. Which is a small number; one of the fundamental constants of physics. But in real terms—suppose you measured an electron's position to within a billionth of an inch. Then the momentum uncertainty would be such that a second later you couldn't be sure where the damn thing was to within a hundred miles."

I nodded. "Then the Principle is describing a fundamental fuzziness in reality—"

She waved her hand with exasperation. "Don't talk like a cheap data tank, Jack. There's nothing fuzzy about reality. The wave functions are the fundamental building blocks of the universe; their governing wave equations are completely deterministic. . . . Well, never mind. The Uncertainty Principle is essentially an expression of the scale of those wave functions."

"How does this relate to your work?"

She sighed and sat back on her couch. "It was at the heart of it, Jack."

Eve had spent much of her working life trying to develop the principles of remote translation systems. Teleport beams, to you and me.

She said, "A translation device might work by scanning the position of every particle in an object. That information could be transferred somewhere else and a copy constructed of the original, exact down to the last electron."

"But the Uncertainty Principle tells us that's impossible."

"Correct. But the Principle says nothing about transferring exact data about the wave functions themselves. . . . And that was the approach I was working on. Also, in some way we still don't fully understand, the quantum waves provide a connectivity to space. When two objects are once joined there is a sense in which they are forever linked, by quantum properties. It may be that unless full quantum functions are copied, remote translation is impossible."

"That which God has joined, let no man put asunder."

She looked at me suspiciously, as if expecting me to burst into tears.

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"Something like that. Jack, it may also be that consciousness is a quantum phenomenon. Without our defining quantum functions—without the anchorage they give us to reality, and to those around us—we are nothing."

I set down my glass, stood and walked to the wall. Hesitantly she got up and walked closer to her side. "And this wave function mapping was the technical barrier you could never breach."

She shrugged. "Perhaps it's just as well. Because if this was a perfect image of me, Jack, stored in this wall, you'd never leave this damn apartment." She looked up at me, and I imagined her eyes softening. "Would you?"

"What would happen if you violated the Uncertainty Principle?"

The image wavered slightly; I imagined the wall frantically searching its data tanks for a response. "You can't. Jack, haven't you understood a word I've said?"

"Just suppose."

She frowned. "If the uncertainty limit were lowered somehow then greater data storage compression would be possible."

"So sharper wall images. What else?"

"Faster, more compact computing devices." The image crumbled for a sudden, shocking moment into a storm of cubical pixels. "Jack, this is right at the edge of what I left in my Notebooks."

"Bear with me, please. . . . It is important. How would you do it?"

She rubbed the bridge of her nose, as if her head was aching. "Assuming you're talking about the universe we're living in—so the fundamental laws are the same—you'd have to find a way of reducing Planck's constant, over some region of space. The interface between Planck-differentiated regions would be kind of interesting. But it's impossible, of course." She looked up at me, troubled. "Jack, I don't like this. It makes me feel—odd."

"I'm sorry." Without thinking I reached for her through the wall; but my hand passed through her arm with little more resistance than if she were made of ancient, crumbled paper.

"Jack. Don't." She stepped back, out of my reach. "It only hurts you."

"I have to go away."

"What?"

"I'm to make an inspection of a Ghost experiment. They say I must be physically modified. . . . I might not come back."

"Well, why the hell not," she said. "For Christ's sake, Jack, I've been dead three years. You're getting morbid." Then she raised both hands to her head and said indistinctly, "If Planck's constant were taken to the ultimate, down to zero—"

"What? Eve, tell me."

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She looked at me through a hail of pixels, her eyes wide. "Space could shatter—"

She dissolved. The wall became a wall again.

The Ghosts had come to awareness on a world orbiting a doomed star. A pulsar companion had, over a billion years, devastated the star, turning it into a worthless shadow. The Ghosts grew to hate their treacherous sky, which they called the Sink—the Heat Sink.

At last the air started snowing. The Ghosts had a choice: perish—or rebuild themselves.

They rebuilt.

Now—for reasons the Sink Ambassador still wouldn't disclose—I was to be made a Ghost.

My brain and spinal cord were rolled up and moved into a cleaned-out chest cavity. My circulatory system was wrapped into a complex mass around the brain pan. The Ghosts built a new metabolic system, far more efficient than the old and capable of working off direct radiative input. New eyes, capable of working in spectral regions well beyond the human range, were bolted into my skull; and I was given Ghost "muscles"—a tiny antigravity drive and compact actuator motors.

At last I was dipped in something like hot mercury.

I still look human. Just. Like a silvered statue. I can't move my legs. My mouth, ears, nose are just for show. My hands and arms have become immensely strong—and they have a disconcerting lack of jointedness, so that I can turn my fingers completely backward.

I can fly. I can fly in space. I can eat sunlight and survive the vacuum for days at a time, sustaining my sixty-five-year-old human core in warmth and darkness.

I don't live behind my eyes any more. I live in my chest. My eyes are like periscopes, far above "me."

The Ghosts won't let humans come too close to me. I have a Ghost doctor; every six months or so it opens me up and cleans me out.

The Sink Ambassador came to see me while I was being reconstructed. Its voice was like a bird hovering in the darkness. "How do you feel?"

I laughed—or sent appropriate impulses to my translator chips, at least. "How do you think I feel?"

"They tell me your spirits are high."

"You're reducing Planck's constant. Aren't you? But I don't understand what quagma has to do with it."

The Ghost hesitated.

When its voice came through again it had a richer timbre. "I have

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established a closed channel. All right, Jack. You are aware that quagma is the state of matter which emerged from the Big Bang. Matter, when raised to sufficiently high temperatures, melts into a magma of quarks—a quagma. And at such temperatures the fundamental forces of physics—" It meant the gravitational, strong and weak nuclear, and electromagnetic forces which govern the everyday universe. "—these forces unify into a single superforce. Quagma is bound together only by such a superforce. When quagma is allowed to cool and expand the superforce decomposes into the four sub-forces."

"So?"

"By controlling the decomposition, one can select the ratio between those forces."

"Ah." Eve, I wish you were here to help me with this. . . . "And those ratios govern the fundamental constants—including Planck's constant."

"Correct."

I wanted to rub my face, but my head and hands had been taken away. "So you're building a model universe, in which Planck's constant is lowered. My God, Ambassador. I'm surprised the Xeelee have let you get as far as you have."

"We have concealed well . . . Jack Raoul, are you still human?"

I would have shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't sound as if you care."

"Why should you?"

"I have known you for a long time, Jack. Among my people there are analogies for the grief you felt at the loss of your wife."

"Ambassador, do you think this is some complicated way of committing suicide? You invited me to take the damn trip, remember."

"Human or not, you will still have friends."

"You can't imagine how much that comforts me."

They disconnected my new senses during the hyperspace flight. "I apologize," the Sink Ambassador said. "When we reach the quagma project site you will have freedom to inspect."

"But you don't trust me with the location."

"I do not have a free rein, my friend."

I spent the passage floating in a Virtual reality, trying not to think about what lay beyond my skin.

I emerged into a half-universe.

I was in a Ghost intrasystem cruiser, a rough ovoid constructed of silvered rope. Instrument clusters were knotted to the walls. Perhaps a dozen Ghosts clung to the rope like berries on seaweed.

Above me I saw stars. Below me a floor of crimson mist, a featureless plane, extended to infinity.

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A Ghost approached me.

"Ambassador?"

"We have arrived, Jack Raoul."

"Arrived where?" I gestured at the blood-red floor. "What the hell is this?"

The Ambassador rolled, as if amused. "Jack, this is a red giant star. Are you familiar with astrophysics? This star is about as wide as Earth's orbit. We have emerged a million miles above its boundary."

I'm no small-time boy; I'd been off Earth before. But this was different. I felt the soft human thing inside my Ghost shell cringe.

I'd seen nothing yet.

The ship plunged into the interior of the star.

I cried out and grabbed at silvered rope. Glowing banks of mist shot upwards all around us. The Ghost crew floated about their tasks, unconcerned.

"Dear God, Ambassador."

"I could not warn you."

We emerged into a clear layer within the star. Far, far below was a dense ocean of fire, looking like some fantastic sodium-lit cityscape; beneath it something small, hot and yellow glowed brightly. We descended through slices of firecloud with startling speed.

The Ambassador said, "You are perhaps aware that this giant is a star in the latter part of its life. Its bulk is a gas whose density is only a thousandth that of Earth's atmosphere, and whose temperature is well below that at the surface of Sol. Easily controlled by your new skin. So you see, there is nothing to fear."

Now the ship veered to the right, and we skirted a huge, blackened thunderhead. "A convection fount; complex products from the core," explained the Ghost.

"The core?"

"Like a white dwarf star, about the size and mass of Sol. It is mostly helium by now, but hydrogen fusion is still proceeding in a surface layer." The Ghost rolled complacently. "Jack, your visit—this project—is inspired by quantum mechanics. Do you understand the Pauli exclusion principle?—That no two quantum objects can share the same state? You may be amused to know that it is electron degeneracy pressure—a form of the Pauli principle—which keeps that core from collapsing on itself."

"You're prepared to live inside a star, just to evade detection by the Xeelee?"

"We anticipate long term benefits."

We dropped into another clear stratum. The core was a ball about as hot and bright as the sun from Earth; it rolled beneath us. Starstuff drifted above us like smog.

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The Ghosts had built a city here.

Once this must have been a moon. It was a rock ball a thousand miles wide, and it was riddled with passages and cavities. Ghost ships swept over the pocked landscape.

At the poles two vast cylindrical structures gleamed. These were intra-system drives, the Ambassador explained, there to maintain the moon's orbit about the core.

Our ship approached the city-world's surface—there was negligible gravity, so that it was like hovering before some vast, slotted wall—and, at length, slid into an aperture.

I turned to the Ambassador. "I won't pretend I'm not impressed."

"Naturally, after this demonstration, I will provide you with any backup data you require for your report."

"Demonstration? Of what?"

A hint of pride shone through the thin, sexless tones of the translator chips. "We have timed your arrival to coincide with the initiation of a new phase of our project."

"I'm honored."

We hurtled along dimly lit passages. Other craft dipped and soared all around us. Blocks of light tumbled from cross-corridors, reminding me irresistibly of pixels. I recalled Eve's strange, ambiguous warning, and wondered bleakly if I really wanted to be present at the dawn of a "new phase."

With a soundless rush we emerged into a spherical cavity miles wide. Beams of crimson starlight crossed the hollow, bathing its walls with a blood-red glow. At the heart of the chamber was a sphere. A couple of miles across, the sphere gleamed golden and was semi-transparent, like a half-silvered mirror. Platforms bearing Ghost workers hovered over its surface.

Some vast machine moved within the confines of the mirrored sphere.

"Mr. Raoul, welcome to our experiment," the Sink Ambassador said.

"What is that sphere?"

"Nothing material. The sphere is the boundary between our universe . . . and another domain, which we have constructed by letting quagma droplets inflate under controlled conditions. Within this domain the ratio you know as Planck's constant is reduced to about 10 percent of its value elsewhere. Other physical constants are identical."

"Why the half-silvered effect?"

"The energy carried by a photon is proportional to the Planck number. When a photon enters the Planck domain the energy it may carry is reduced. Do you understand? It therefore sheds energy at the boundary, in the form of a second photon, emitted back into normal space."

I asked if we were to enter the Planck space.

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"I fear not," the Ambassador said. "Our fundamental structure is based on Planck's constant: the spacing of electrons around the nucleus of an atom, for example. If you were to enter the domain, you would be—adjusted. The device in there—an artificial mind—has been constructed to withstand such Planck changes. The device controls the regeneration of the domain from quagma; we are also using it to conduct computational experiments."

The machine in its golden sac turned, brooding, like some vast animal.

"Ambassador, what is your purpose?"

The Ghosts had two objectives. The first was to use the Planck boundary conditions to build a perfect reflective surface, an age-old goal of the energy-hoarding Ghosts.

The second objective was more interesting.

"The capacity of any computing machine is limited by the Uncertainty Principle," the Ambassador said. "The exploration of, say, high-value prime numbers has always been constrained by the fact that energy changes within a device must remain above the uncertainty level.

"With the reduction in Planck's constant we can go further. Much further. For example, we have already managed to find a disproof of an ancient human hypothesis known as Goldbach's conjecture."

Goldbach, it seems, speculated that any even number can be expressed as the sum of two primes. Twelve equals five plus seven; forty equals seventeen plus twenty-three. Centuries of endeavor had neither proved nor disproved the hypothesis.

The Planck machine had found a counterexample, a number in the region of ten raised to the power eighty.

"I guess I'm impressed," I said.

The Ghost rolled gently. "My friend, age-old problems melt before our Planck machine; already several NP-type problems have—"

I told the Ambassador I believed it, and to dump down the details later.

The science platforms were pulling away now, leaving the gold-silver sphere exposed and alone.

The Sink Ambassador continued its lecture. "But we want to go further. We see this Planck-adjustment technique as a means of probing—not just the very large—but the infinite. Our device will verify some of the most important theorems of our, and your, mathematics—the Reimann hypothesis! the Fermat theorem!—simply by a direct inspection of cases, all the way to infinity."

I stared at the bobbing Ghost. "I think you're losing me. Won't an infinite number of cases still take an infinite amount of time?—and energy?"

"Not if the time and energy is allocated in decreasing amounts, so that the total converges to some finite value. And if the Uncertainty Principle

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is removed completely, there is no limit to the smallness of energy allocations."

"Right. So you're going to take Planck's constant all the way to zero."

"That's right. And, Jack, mathematical conjectures are just the start. A training exercise. The artificial mind is heuristic—it is flexible; it can learn. With its infinite capacity at our disposal we anticipate the dawn of a new era of—"

There was a spark, dazzling bright, at the heart of the silvered Planck sac. The mind device thrashed like some grotesque fetus.

I knotted my fingers in a length of silvered rope. "Ambassador, 'space could shatter.' "

"What?"

"What does that mean to you?"

". . . Nothing. Jack, are you—"

The flame filled the sac, overwhelming the machine. For an instant the sac glowed brighter than the star core.

Then the sac turned silver. It looked like some huge Ghost. Images of the crowding science platforms, of the slotted walls of the city-world cavity, shivered over its flanks.

"Ambassador, what's happening?"

". . . I'm not certain."

"Have you achieved Planck zero?"

"Yes. But the device should be signaling to us—"

The walls of the sac contracted by a few hundred feet, trembling; it was as if the sac were a living creature, breathing in.

My ship lurched away from the sac and toward the walls of the chamber. One crewman was left tumbling in space, like a drop of mercury in freefall. I clung grimly to my rope.

The walls were still miles away.

The sac's surface billowed out and overwhelmed us.

I was utterly alone.

Lonely.

Darkness.

. . . Dark because photons could carry no energy, here at Planck-zero; nothing to excite my optic sensors . . .

Cold. How could I be cold? I rubbed my hands together. I could feel my fingers break up like ancient, crumbled paper.

Electron orbits in an atom are proportional to Planck's constant. At Planck-zero the orbits must collapse . . . right? So, no more chemistry. How long before the crumbling process reached my brain pan?

How would it feel?

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And quantum wave-functions, linking me to the rest of the universe, had all turned to dust at Planck-zero.

I could feel it. I was alone in this shattered space.

What about the ship? Was it still heading for the wall?

. . . Something else, in here with me. The Ghosts? No; something larger, more powerful.

Infinite.

The mind-device was without limit. It was stranded in this discontinuous space, and it was enraged.

Enraged by a pain I recognized.

Now I made out other minds. Ghosts. They were like tiny stars, shining out, falling away from each other.

The Planck mind lashed out. Ghosts were overwhelmed, insects in fire.

. . . The ship burst out of the sac; quantum functions rushed over me (for a precious moment visible, like prismatic waves lapping around me) and I was bound into the universe once more.

The ship hurtled through a city-world passage, trailing ragged fragments. Ghosts lay dying all around me, their proud bodies deflated.

I looked back down the passage. A silver half-dome peered after us like some vast eye.

". . . Sink Ambassador?"

"I'm still here, Jack."

We emerged from the city-world. Ghost paramedics floated onto our ship and tended the wounded.

The city-world was changing.

A light, clear and white, shone out of the hundreds of portals, illuminating the murky giant star material. The massive drive assemblies at the poles had been damaged; I saw sparks fizzing across the surface of the nearer. A flotilla of heavy Ghost ships approached the drive units.

"Ambassador, what are they doing?"

"We must endeavor to repair the drive units, or the moon will fall into the core. . . . Jack, the growth of the Planck sac in that cavity was not controlled. We are afraid."

"I bet you are."

"We are going to try to move the moon out of the giant."

"And then what?"

"We must find some way to restrain the sac."

I stared down at the core of the giant. "Ambassador, it will overwhelm you. What are the limits to its growth?"

"There are no limits. Perhaps the Xeelee will intervene."

"The Xeelee aren't gods. Sink Ambassador, listen to me. Do you have any influence over operations here?"

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"Why?"

"Stop the efforts to repair the drives."

". . . I do not have the authority."

"Then find someone who does. As acting human ambassador here, I formally request this. Sink Ambassador, have you recorded that?"

"Yes, Jack. Why do you want this?"

"Because I'm frightened, too. But I think there is a way out."

The Ghosts cut the drive assemblies loose from the city-world. Within an hour the Planck sac had overwhelmed the battered moon; it hung in the giant star glow, perfectly silver.

They got us out of there. I could see reflections in the sac's surface, chains of ropy Ghost ships heading for safety.

It took about a day for the Planck sac to impact the star core. By that time it was ten thousand miles wide and still growing. Huge ripples crossed its monstrous surface. It slid inside the star core, fusing hydrogen closing smoothly over the shining ovoid, vacuoles flaring.

An hour later the core started to implode.

Disembodied, the Sink Ambassador and I floated over Virtual images of the collapsing core. I said, "I wish Eve could see this."

"Yes."

By now, of course, the Ghosts had figured it out for themselves; but I couldn't resist rubbing it in. "It was your chance comment about electron degeneracy pressure that gave me the key. Suppose Planck were reduced to zero in the star core. The higher quantum states would collapse—spin values, for instance, would fall from Planck multiples to zero."

The Pauli exclusion principle could not work, and electron degeneracy pressure would fail. The star core must implode . . . all the way, past the neutron star compaction limit, on to become a black hole.

"Actually," the Ambassador said smoothly, "there are technicalities you didn't consider. For example, no electron can have zero spin value. Nor can any fermion. Presumably the core fermions are collapsing to bosons, like photons. . . . The physics must be interesting in there."

"Whatever. It worked, didn't it?"

"Yes. We have contained the Planck-zero sac expansion. Within an event horizon, for all time."

"And we've locked away your Planck mind device."

The Ghost thought that over. "That is important to you?"

"What did you sense, inside the sac?"

"Infinite power . . . and anger."

"There was more, Ambassador. In discontinuous space, without the anchorage of quantum wave functions, it was utterly alone. And lonely. And it was furious. Do you see?"

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Quantum loneliness.

I had recognized a fellow sufferer. In my loneliness I can only hurt myself, but the mind-device had an infinite capacity for destruction. Still, it was trapped now. . . .

Then I began to wonder, and I haven't been able to stop.

Is there any way *out* of a black hole?●

AMAZON

by Roger Dutcher

My father told me of his grandfather
who could walk for weeks
and never see an end to the trees.
A jungle our land was called.
A *rain forest. Rain.*

I laughed,
we all do when I tell of it now,
a rainforest.
The hard, dry ground
cracking in laughter of its own,
remembers rain as little as we.
Yet that story
started me gathering others.
I travel, learning stories as I go.
I tell of a time when food grew plentifully.
You grew crops you did not eat,
bought things you did not need.
You picked flowers enough
to use for decoration,
and if you were a healer
—I have talked with healers—
long ago the plants you needed grew everywhere.
Animals gamboled among the trees.

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Birds of bright colors created rainbows when they flew;
and fish, teeth sharper than the jaguar,
were more dangerous than the droughts;
yet we have never seen them.
Some say the stars are hot—
I cannot believe it true,
they are so small
and the hue of the moon
shining coldly above my crude bed.
Some Brazilians as stars,
circled this world,
looking down from such heights
even mountains looked small.
Some stories cause people to cry.
Tales of mistakes made,
opportunities missed
by scientists, politicians, and lovers
ring more true than others I tell.
A thousand of the legends of the Amazon
I do not believe—
tall tales, good for food,
some laughter, a place to spend the night.
Only one legend I think is real,
that of the river
once strong and mighty.
I see the evidence as I travel
its length, its many arms now crippled
and amputated by the droughts.
I see spit and piss disappear
into the ground leaving no trace,
and wonder at that power which
can shrivel this mighty river,
The Amazon, the source,
power and magic behind all legends
and wonder of the past.

I continue to travel.
Somewhere I will find a place
where the river still runs mighty,
and the legends I don't believe
rush in eddies about my feet.

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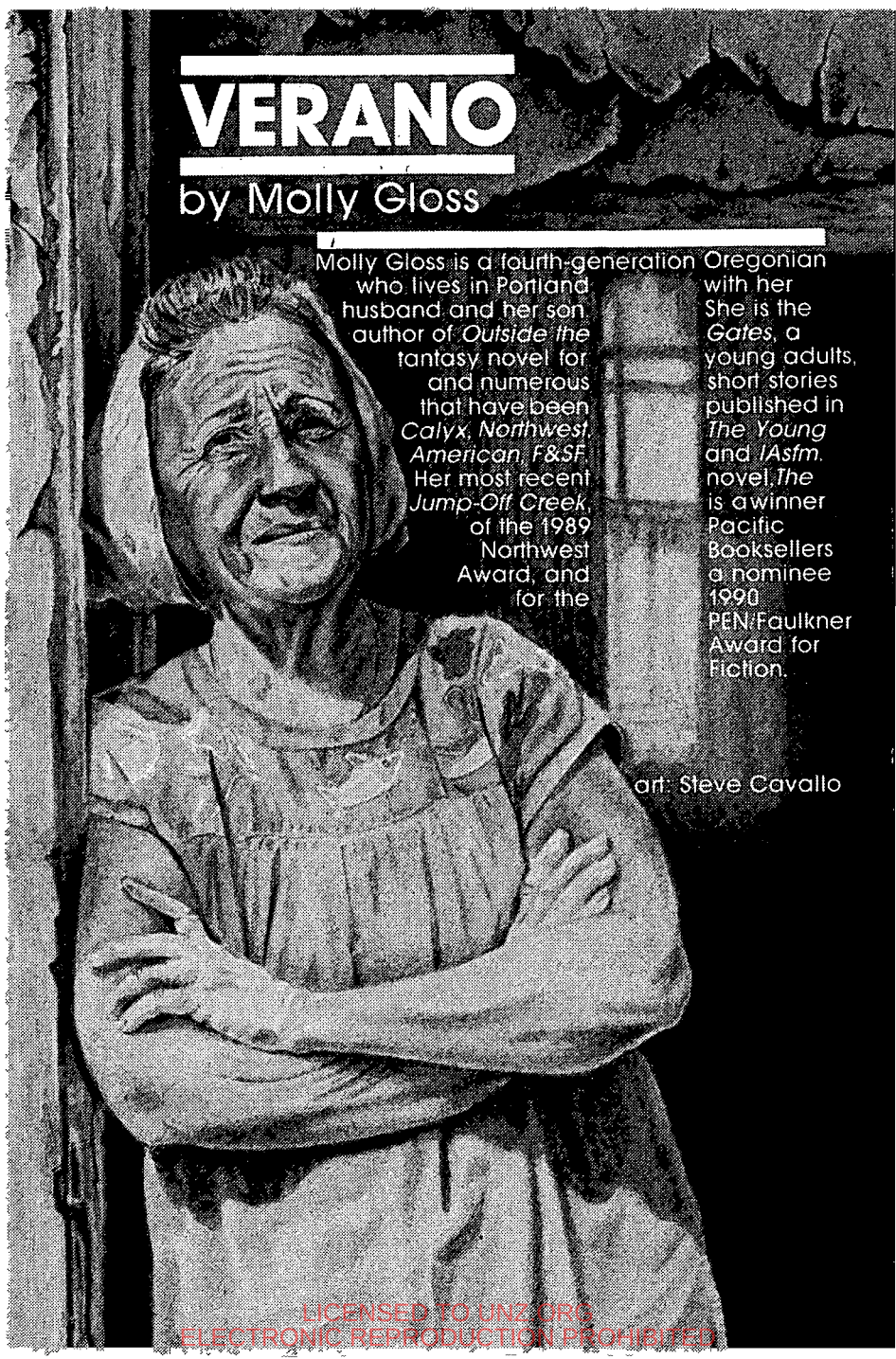
VERANO

by Molly Gloss



Molly Gloss is a fourth-generation Oregonian who lives in Portland with her husband and her son. She is the author of *Outside the Gates*, a fantasy novel for young adults, and numerous short stories that have been published in *The Young Calyx*, *Northwest*, and *IAstm. American*, *F&SF*. Her most recent novel, *The Jump-Off Creek*, is a winner of the 1989 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, and a nominee for the 1990 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

art: Steve Cavallo

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Darest though now O soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?

The Ojo de la Luna had endured for two hundred and forty years, steadfastly practicing Quaker love and faith in the midst of chaos and wars. Dolores Negrete's house was as old as the settlement, built before the Third-World's War, before the last two or three wars, a thick-walled *bahareque* with white-washed beams. It had an idiosyncratic placement, its windowless back standing to the cart road that joined Dolores's house to others in the Ojo. The unglazed front windows looked "behind," to a field dotted with orange trees, and a high-peaked shed roof that one time had housed a sugar mill. There had been vertical steel rollers for pressing the sap from the sugarcane, and a stone hearth for cooking the juice in a great copper cauldron, but those now were gone. The roof that had covered them was used to shelter the maize.

Dolores grew maize, an old kind, with a dark purple husk that fit the ear tightly and extended beyond it in a long stiff beak. These tough husks for the most part kept out the weevils that destroyed so much stored grain in a climate prevailingly wet and warm. Outside the Ojo, people followed the pandemic, inherently life-hating impulse of technology: they planted ever larger hybrids that outgrew their clothes, corn that kept badly and had frequently to be treated with pesticides. In two or three or four generations they would probably finish the killing of the Earth.

Dolores thought the roof of the *dulce* shed had likely been thatched with sugarcane leaves in old times, but for many generations now it had borne a corrugated iron roof, not picturesque, but cheap and easy to maintain. Four posts held up the roof; otherwise the shed was open. Some of the later granaries on the Ojo de la Luna were set on stone bases, built substantially of heavy timbers and sawed boards; they kept out the cinnamon-bellied squirrels that were attracted to the open granaries. But no squirrels had been seen on the Ojo in the last years, and anyway Dolores never had begrudged them their share. The corn they exposed invited birds—grosbeaks and doves and shy wood-rails, when she had been a girl, but later only the grosbeaks—which she liked to stand and watch, with her forearms resting on the wide frame of the window. In past years, too, a pair of blue tanagers had made a small soft cup on the ridgepole in the very center of the high-peaked roof, and the female had laid and hatched eggs, sometimes from three or four eggs raising one nestling. Dolores had not seen a tanager in a decade or more, but a Gray's thrush had lately built her nest in a dark corner of the shed roof and was brooding the eggs she had laid in it, and that was what Dolores came to look at, on the day before moving out of her house.

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The maize that had remained in the shed from the last year's harvest had already been taken away, the bins loaded up to the *Dusty Miller*. Grosbeaks had come in the days afterward to glean the spilled grain and break it in their strong bills, and when Dolores went out and stood under the metal roof on the dusty ground, her sandals scuffed the litter of emptied hulls. She peered up at the thrush's nest. She was sixty years old and arthritis was in her knees, yet after a moment she climbed painfully up the ladder that was nailed to a pole of the shed, and sat in the hot dimness straddling the center beam.

The poor thrush had flown off to one of the orange trees, her eggs undefended. She had laid three. In six or eight more days, if any of the eggs were viable, they would be hatched, but Dolores Negrete would have moved to the *Dusty Miller* by then, wouldn't be there to see it, though she had lived the whole of her life until now in this house on the Ojo de la Luna—her parents were buried in this land, she always had thought she would one day be buried beside them.

What would be done with the bodies of the dead, on the *Dusty Miller*? People said they would be burnt and the ashes turned in with the soil. Where would the smoke go? Dolores wondered suddenly. She looked out through the gable-end of the granary toward the ridge beyond the river, the sooty brown edge of the sky. When she had been young, a girl, in some months of the year the sun would come above the ridge in the cool mornings and flood the sky with transparent light, and the atmosphere on such mornings was clear at least as far as the nearest summits of the Cordillera. But even in those years, by March usually, the farming populations all up and down the narrow highland backbone of Middle America were burning their fields, the hillsides too stony or steep for plowing; and the burden of smoke in the air would shroud the peaks, the sun would rise red, a glare. There never were clear days now, not in the rainy season, not even in January, which had traditionally held the year's most pleasant weather. In the afternoons, in every month, the air was hot, murky, oppressive. In March, when the corporate farms were making ready to plant their fields, columns of smoke would rise high above the tops of the ridges all around the Ojo, and ash would drift down on the porches, the fields, the jacaranda trees. Where would the smoke go, on the *Dusty Miller*? It was all right if they wanted to put Dolores's ashes in the soil, there was a clarity to that, a circularity she liked. But she didn't want the smoke of her body to foul the air.

She settled her buttocks on the heavy timber and brought her legs up, braced against the crossbeam, to sit staring with burning, tearless eyes, at the thrush's unprotected eggs, the neatly built nest. It had occurred to her to wonder if this might be the last such nest she would see in her lifetime. She didn't know if there would be any Gray's thrushes nesting

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on the *Dusty Miller*. The cropland was a subtropical pastiche, but the woodland was specific, had been planted from a matrix Dolores had never seen, a little parcel of mountainous land which the Costa Rica Society of Friends had been willed a century before by the Nature Conservancy. It was barely one hundred hectares of undeveloped land, steep, inaccessible, or they'd have been made to cut and burn it and turn it to crops years before, by a government that here as elsewhere was a parasitic bureaucracy, suffocating the host it was intended to nurture. The carnivores and the big, wide-ranging herbivores, those were gone, all of them, had been gone for decades, not able to live on the small range; but the land still harbored a native biology, a few dozen species of formerly hundreds of tortoises, snakes, lizards, toads, frogs, newts, birds, insects. Were there Gray's thrushes living in those wild trees? She didn't know.

After a while of perching in the rafters of the shed, staring wordlessly at the thrush's little nest, Dolores thought, *This is stupid and foolish*, and she climbed stiffly down the ladder and went inside the house. She stood and peered out the window, waiting among the half dozen plastic crates of her packing, until the wary bird came back to the eggs. She had not done anything to help the bird, had left no seed for it, nor clear water, hadn't put out materials for its nest-building. What would be the point? When she was gone, when the *Dusty Miller* had weighed anchor and spread its sail and left the shadow of the Earth, the bird must live or die as God willed. But she stood and waited, watching, until she was sure the thrush had come back to reclaim the nest. Then she sat down tiredly on one of the crates.

On the lids of all the crates, Dolores had printed her name with a purple pen, in stout, close-shouldered uppercase letters. There was a smooth circle in the plastic beside the name, a space to write an identifying word or symbol. On the lid of one crate, she had drawn an open-leafed book. The size of the box, the bulk and weight that were permitted to her, had forced her to providence: there were loose drifts of books on the floor in the two rooms of her house—a hundred or so culls. In the crate, there were just twenty-six.

She had kept Zardoya's translations of Whitman, but nothing of Calderon's. Had put aside *Le Grand Meaulines*, kept *Les Miserables*. Three books were old, rare, had a value beyond the words: She had kept a copy of the journals of George Fox—it was a seminal work of the Society of Friends, there would be no shortage of copies on the *Miller*, but this one was printed on a thick, sturdy paper made from Asian hemp and illuminated in vivid colored inks. She had held onto an early edition of Rufus Jones's sweet and spiritual guide, *Finding the Trail of Life*, inscribed to one of her family's forebears. And she had the only copy of Elizabeth Martin's hand-written diary—Elizabeth and her husband had

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been among the First Seventy who settled the Ojo de la Luna. Dolores could trace her family line back to the Martins; the diary was a family treasure.

Inexplicably, suddenly, she was stricken with apprehension: had she put *Song of the Lark* in the stacks to be given away, or the box to be taken up? *Adios, Mr. Moxley? Sigrid Lavransdatter?* She got up from the crate and slid away the lid and got down painfully on her knees, sorting through the books, reading and rereading the indexing in a fever of suspicion. By what measure had she included *The Magic Mountain*, but not *Pájaros del Nuevo Mundo*?

Dusk came slowly inside the house but the air remained thick, hot. Dolores kept kneeling before the box in the breathless darkness, overcome with nostalgia and an undecipherable sorrow, her forehead dropping to rest against her forearms. How had she imagined she could live the balance of her life without rereading Cesar Vallejos?

It occurred to her suddenly, in this dry season she could walk to Nita's house across the Rio Pardo without wetting her knees.

Nita Capena's husband had studied mechanical systems so that he could do maintenance work on the *Dusty Miller*. The husband had gone to the *Miller* long since, but Nita still lived in their house on the west side of the Ojo. She was a farmer, like Dolores—she wanted to stay and get the rest of her bananas in and not go up until near the last. Nita's husband surely would know about the smoke of the burnt bodies, and he might have told Nita. Probably it was a simple answer. Dolores only wanted to be reassured, to know this little thing had not somehow been overlooked by everyone.

She got up stiffly as soon as she'd thought of Nita, and went out of the house, around to the cart road. It was a dusty track, rutted; they had deliberately kept it unpaved to discourage non-Quakers from coming onto the lands of the Ojo, a tactic that had not been completely successful. There had been killings, crazy wildings, here as everywhere, but Dolores and her neighbors went on using the road after dark on peaceful principles. They trusted in the justice of God. *What happens, happens*, people frequently said, meaning death by plague or cancer, as well as murder.

She was for a while kept company by the voices of her neighbors on the still air, their shapes moving within the familiar lighted windows of the houses she passed. Where the road dropped down in the rocky channel of the river and began to follow the low water, the air was darker, cooler, more silent, a comfort of another kind. In the daylight the Rio Pardo was a grief, scummed yellow along its margins, but in the darkness the sound it made was soft and easeful, and she saw only the shapes of the rounded boulders against the colorless blackness of the water.

The heavy forest had been shorn from the steep slopes higher on the

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watershed, and in the flood season the river was every year more ravaging—where a bridge had once spanned it, she waded across following the cart tracks between the old cement footings, pushing her bare ankles through the tepid, dead water. Afterward, on her skin, the slime itched and stunk, and she finally stooped and rubbed her sticky legs with handfuls of dust.

The track climbed out of the gully of the river again and houses were strung along the road, but here many of them stood empty, unlit. People had been moving up to the *Miller* for nearly a year, and those who would be left behind had been moving their things into different houses, drawing together onto the southeast end of the Ojo de la Luna, anticipating a government confiscation of "underutilized" land. It was this west side that would be ceded eventually, when the Legal Committee had exhausted the appeals. The lands were still tended by farmers who had moved over to the southeast, but at night the vacant houses stood dark and mute, ghosting the landscape. The air here, away from the water, was thicker, and Dolores went on slowly past the empty buildings, measuring her breaths on the still night.

Nita Capena's house was as dark as the others. Dolores stood in the yard in front of it and tried to make up her mind if she ought to tap on the door. She didn't know if Nita had gone up to the *Dusty Miller* on the last heavy-lift launch, or if she lay inside her house in the hot, torpid darkness, asleep or awake, waiting for dreams. She was suddenly embarrassed to have walked this distance in the night, to get Nita from her bed to ask where the smoke of burned bodies would go in a closed world. There was no shame in last minute misgivings, but this now began to sound to her like an old woman's fretfulness. She didn't consider herself old yet—oldness had receded before her as she had aged. But this was the kind of useless carking that had irritated her in her mother's last years. If she was afraid to move to that place, she ought to just say so, and stop picking at a silly thing that she well knew would not have escaped others' notice.

Stupid, she thought in embarrassment, and before Nita might come to the door or the window and see her standing there in the darkness, she turned and started back along the cart road toward her own house, slapping her feet down briskly in the dust.

Her foolish behavior confused and disconcerted her. She always had considered herself strong minded, someone who would act on her feelings without faltering. It was a surprise to realize she might have been thinking of changing her mind, and hiding it from herself in silliness. It offended her, this dancing around on cold feet.

They were at the height of the verano, the dry season, no rain had fallen for weeks. The ground was fissured, the grasses brown, shrubbery

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stooped and withered. Her sandals raised a fine pale powder that hung in the night. At this time of year it was easy to imagine that the death of the Earth was not very distant. She remembered suddenly it had been in the dry season the year before, when she had said she would go onto the *Dusty Miller*. She had become afraid she would live long enough to see the end, if she stayed.

But today, tonight, she wondered why she had been afraid. "Now I am clear. I am fully clear," George Fox was supposed to have said when he died. It might be there was only so much that could be learned from life; perhaps then one had to wait for what would be exhibited by death.

Dolores had never married, had no children to persuade her. Quite a few people she knew were staying behind—some of them considered themselves too old for this change, and some were frightened, but there were some who had just never believed in going, who saw a moral wrong in forsaking the Earth at the hour of her death. Dolores hadn't any compunction that way. Quaker principles had been proffered to the world for many hundreds of years, and indifferently spurned or actively expunged everywhere; she was sorry for the world's lost children, but saw no sin in giving up the effort to save them. Her confusion and indecision were more personal.

There still were mornings, in the April rains, when she got a yearning to tramp out to the horizon—a wanderlust so palpable it made her breast ache. Where, on the *Dusty Miller*, would she tramp to? She knew the circle of the hollow torus could be walked round in fifteen or twenty minutes, was a bare two thousand meters from starting point round again to starting point. Big as some islands, people said, but other people said there was a melancholy that got into the soul of an island people. And this weather they had made to be inside the metal skin of the donut, would there be the Fourth Month rains? What if there were no Gray's thrushes, and the smoke from people's burned bodies was let out to darken the air? She didn't consider herself a Tico, her culture was Quaker, but she didn't know the other Friends joining them in this undertaking—their communities had Japanese names, English, Norwegian, the people were strangers to her. She didn't speak Esperanto very well. Maybe she was too old to learn it better, or maybe too tired. She was afraid the arthritis, which was a new thing, might before long make her no use to anyone—or worse, an encumbrance, which would surely be a vaster problem in that place than here.

What if, in ten years or twenty, when they were too far away to get back, all the trees and the birds began to die? It might be the matrix they had used was too diminished after all for species survival. Something like that had happened in the first place, when the *Dusty Miller* was still

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named the *Crommelin*, built for the rich man, Jon Crommelin, a scrupulously beautiful and ostentatiously private refuge hung above the poisoned sky, every grain of dirt disinfected, every person and object sterilized, unpleasant insects and reptiles kept out. In a year, less than a year, there had been a collapse of the ecosystem, and the dead toroid was abandoned. It had been the idea of the Friends World Committee for the dozen communities of cenobite Quakers to join in bargaining for the *Crommelin* and attempting its renascence—some one on that committee had understood the microbial needs of a closed system, had guessed the conceit that must have killed the life there. Who would have thought it would come, eventually, to Dolores Negrete sitting among the boxes of her possessions, waiting to be taken away from her home?

What if she missed the sky? The sun?

A shape reared up in the darkness alongside the roadcut, and Dolores's heart sprang against the cage of her ribs. She stood up straighter and made a swift plan for escaping back to the last lighted house, a hundred meters, if there were trouble. The person looked toward her and lifted both hands in a peaceful or inquiring gesture. In a moment, Dolores came on along the ruts. There was something familiar in the way the person stood.

"Arturo?"

"Dolores!"

"You gave me a start. Were you just sitting there by the road?"

"I been walking but my feet got hot. I need a drink, you got one?"

Arturo Remlinger was a slow-witted man whose mother had died the year before. He frequently went walking up and down the roads looking for his mother. He understood as much as an eight-year-old, maybe. What did eight-year-olds understand of death? What did anyone?

"No, I haven't got water, Arturo. But come on with me, we'll walk up the road and get you some." Arturo's brother had taken on his care. The brother's house wasn't far off. Probably Arturo had padded out the door after everyone there had gone to bed.

She took his soft hand and led him. He had a big, doughy body, a round face without angles. He was prone to unpredictable storms of temper—he would wheel his big arms and stomp his feet and roll his head on his thick neck. The sounds that came out of him then were rageful and wordless, terrifying, heartbreaking. Neighbors would come when they heard him, and help his mother—now his brother—gently press him out-of-doors where he wasn't as likely to hurt himself. The house his mother had lived in had been bare of ornament, she had learned to give up breakable things. The brother had a wife who was a clay artist, and two young children. What hung on the walls, sat on the tables, now in their house?

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"I need a drink," Arturo repeated. He stated his need flatly, and then seemed to wait in patience for her to answer it.

"Well, let's go and find some," she said, in as flat a manner as his. They walked up the road together. "What do you think? Is the dry season about finished?" she asked him. One of his interests was the weather. He liked to repeat and repeat the accounts he heard on the satellite radio stations, of weather in Lithuania and Botswana, Kampuchea, Greenland, Chile.

He swung his head back and forth heavily. "No. Not finished. But we'll get some rain someday, ha ha." He grinned softly and used the hand Dolores was holding, to gesture for both of them vaguely overhead. "Rains every night, just about, on the houseboat," he explained happily. "I like raining. Hey, Dolores, I'm going up there, are you?"

Dolores had been present when someone at a meeting had wondered aloud: should impaired and disabled people be kept from joining the immigration to the *Dusty Miller*? A Japanese Friend had sat among them, a woman who had come over from a community sweetly named The Way of the Tranquil Heart, to ask her committee's questions about the plant species in the matrix. She was the one who had stood up after the long, listening silence and said what everyone there already knew. *Something of divine origin, of the inner light of God, is in every human being*, she had said in a slow and correct Spanish. It was one of the four cardinal principles of the Society of Friends. Dolores remembered the way the air had felt at that moment, charged and vivid. And afterward there had been no further questioning about the disabled.

"Yes, I'm going too," she said to him, before remembering she had recently doubted it.

"Hey!" Arturo said. "You know they got a hurricane in the Philippines, and floods killed eighty-two thousand fifty-six?" He didn't especially care if she responded. He went on telling her about weather—hailstorms in Azerbaijan, drought throughout Africa, tornadoes in the delta of the Mississippi River. He remembered or invented numbers of dead, rainfall statistics, the projected paths of storms. Dolores walked beside him silently, holding his clammy, pulpy hand. She was thinking of what she had said to him, and considering whether she had told the truth. *I'm going too.* Well, if she didn't go, no one would be angry. No one would ask her for an explanation. The heavy lift launches always were deliberately overbooked, allowing for the five or six who could be counted on to draw back at the last minute. Some few people had even gone up and then come down again. There wasn't any shame in it. No one would want people living on the *Dusty Miller* who weren't sure they wanted to be there.

"Here, we're home," she said softly to Arturo when she led him up on

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the porch of his brother's house. The door stood open; Arturo had left it ajar, going out, or the family had left it open to release the built-up heat from under their roof. Dolores wouldn't have gone inside, she didn't want to frighten anyone who might wake and see her standing there, but Arturo kept stubborn hold of her hand and brought her with him into the dark front room, where there were shapes of things—cupboards and tables and low cushions—but not people. Probably the family slept in the second room.

"I sure need a drink," Arturo repeated patiently.

"I haven't forgotten." She peered in the darkness for their cask of distilled water, then she disentangled her fingers from Arturo's grip and hunted for something to pour the water into. While she was groping for a cup in the shadows along the shelves of a cupboard, a barefoot woman came out from the sleeping room.

"Arturo, who is it with you?" the woman said, with a loud, false boldness. Maybe her husband wasn't in the house.

Arturo stood where Dolores had left him, his heavy legs planted in the front room. He swung from the waist toward his sister-in-law, swung back, then swung again, lifting his arms slightly. "She's getting me a drink," he said.

"I'm Dolores Negrete. Arturo was out on the road." She didn't know the sister-in-law except by her works—delicate clay pots painted with rigid, grimacing faces in dark colors of blood and jade and cobalt, and ornamented by bits of bone and feather. Burial Pots, Dolores thought they were, and enjoyed the irony of their popularity at the souvenir shops in the gambling casinos and whorehouses along the coast.

The woman's body released its stiffness. She said tiredly, "Arturo." She made a vague movement of one hand. "He goes out after we're asleep. He wants to find his mother, who's been dead for eight months."

"I didn't find her yet," Arturo said seriously. "Because she's dead."

Dolores nodded. "I can't find a cup."

The sister-in-law came across the dark room. She wore a thin cotton slip, white or ginger colored, that seemed to move alone, luminous, through the darkness. The woman took a cup from a shelf and held it beneath the tap of the water cask. "Here, Arturo, here's your drink, but you know where the water is, and the cups. You could just help yourself."

Arturo drank the water swiftly down, holding the cup to his mouth with both big hands. His drinking was silent, neat. Afterward, lowering the cup, he said, "Thirsty," as an explanation.

"Go and pee and then go to bed," the woman said to him.

"I already peed. I did it on a tree." Dolores could see the edge of his white teeth, the sly smiling.

"All right, then. Just go to bed."

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"Hey Barbara, Dolores is going on the houseboat and so are we." He swung toward Dolores. "My mother isn't going because she's dead."

"Go to bed now," Barbara said. She took the big man by the shoulders and turned him toward the door of the sleeping room. He came around with her slowly, his shoulders ahead of his hips and his feet.

"See you, Dolores," he said, twisting his head back.

"Good night, Arturo."

"They got a big storm in the Philippines today."

"Good night, Arturo."

"Okay, Dolores, see you."

He went out of the front room slowly. They could hear him in a moment, whispering loudly to someone in the bedroom. "Philippines," he whispered.

"Thank you for bringing him home," Barbara said. She stood with her thin arms folded across the front of her slip. She had a small face, short hair, there was no seeing her features in the darkness.

"I knew Arturo's mother a little," Dolores said, meaning to set aside any need for Barbara's gratitude. "You are all going up to the *Miller*, eh?" she had to ask the sister-in-law. Other people's decisions in this matter seemed suddenly important to her—they might have considered things that had escaped her attention.

"We are. But not until August. Juan is on the Legal Committee, and he wants to stay until the West Side appeals are all turned down."

There wouldn't be any need for attorneys on the *Dusty Miller*. Nor perhaps artists, as some people said there wouldn't be the resources. Dolores wanted to ask her, *What will your husband do, in that place? Will you give up your art?* And as if her thought had been spoken, Barbara said, "He'll be glad to be out of law, he never was happy in it. He's studying ways to teach, meantime. Teaching, he can keep Arturo with him. It's all home schools there, you know."

She didn't know. She had paid not much attention to the reports of things to do with children, and families.

"What will you do?" she asked Barbara, now that she'd been made to feel the subject was open.

Barbara's thin shoulders lifted slightly. "I'm a potter."

Dolores nodded. "Yes."

The woman made a soft sound, a laugh. "No. Not those. Art is craft, anyway, at its pure heart. Probably I'll make plates and bowls and ceramic parts for machinery. And tiles." She sounded satisfied, and there wasn't any way to see, in the darkness, if her face spoke another truth.

Dolores said, with a shrug, "I've always only farmed, myself. I guess the farming will be the same, there or here. That's what people say."

"Only the weather will be better." Barbara smiled slowly, gesturing

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with one hand. "Arturo has been telling us everything about the weather up there."

"And in the Philippines."

She laughed again. "Yes. In the Philippines."

"Well, there won't be any hurricanes in that thing, I guess," Dolores admitted. "And if they've thought it out right, the made-rain won't burn the trees, eh?"

There was a brief silence. Then Barbara asked her, "When is it you're going up?"

"I'm packed. I'm to be taken up in the morning." She thought of adding, *But I don't know if I'm going*, and discovered she had no wish, after all, to let anyone else look at her decision.

Barbara nodded. She shifted her weight silently, and it became clear she was waiting to go back to her bed.

Dolores went to the open door. "Well, good night, then," she said in embarrassment. She would have kept on with their talk, she seemed to have this compulsion now, to discuss the environment of the *Dusty Miller*.

"Good night," Barbara said, without moving from where she stood, arms folded, in the middle of the front room. "Thank you for bringing Arturo home. We'll see each other, maybe, up there."

"We might."

She went off the porch and down the cart road at a plodding pace, the air thick and hot whether inside a house or out of it. The darkness was starless, feverish, the moon a smudged, brownish ellipse behind the dirty sky. She wished she had gotten a drink from Arturo's cup. Wished she had brought him to the door and said goodnight and gone quickly away from the tired woman's house. Why was she behaving in this stupid way tonight?

From the road, her own house showed her its windowless backside. A great-grandmother of hers had been a muralist. She had painted across the big flat wall a likeness of two people passing on a road, their hands lifted in greeting. It had been repainted by Dolores's grandmother, and mother, and lately by Dolores. Above the mural, at one time, had been a sort of traveler's greeting, a few welcoming words that could be read from the road, but Dolores's mother, and Dolores too, had let the writing fade, as the world they lived in now did not admit of safe relations between strangers. In the darkness, the words were illegible pale markings, arcane brush strokes. But she was happy to see the mural. She'd got home finally, to her great-grandmother's welcome.

She went around to the front of the house and put on a light inside. There were the boxes, the plastic crates, taking up the room; they gave her a sort of surprise. *Well.*

She ought to have gone to bed. She was tired, certainly, and someone

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would be at her door early, to take away her packing. But she sat down among the crates and then got up again suddenly, restless, and went among them until she'd found the one with a book drawn on its lid. She pushed things around and got Elizabeth Martin's diary from underneath.

Many people were keeping diaries again. In these momentous times, they wanted to record the events and their feelings—explanations, apologies, defense, addressed to children and grandchildren and the seven or eight generations afterward who must stay to this course being chosen for them all. Dolores herself had been given an empty book, a friend's daughter's work, hand-bound. But Dolores had no children, no one to whom she must apologize—for whom would she write? She couldn't imagine what person now unborn would struggle to work out her spidery handwriting, her soon-extinct Spanish, for reading of painful joints, of granaries with metal roofs, musings about the smoke of burnt bodies and the leaving-behind of birds' nests.

There was a rayon ribbon she used to mark her place in Elizabeth Martin's diary. The First Seventy had been members of Ohio or Iowa Yearly Meetings, who had emigrated after one of the first World Wars—escaping militarism, as they thought—and Elizabeth's diary was in English. Dolores was making her slow way through it for the third time or the fourth, her English still as poor as her Esperanto. She didn't open to the rayon ribbon, she let the book open where it would, as she had seen the religious do with prayer books in hope it was God's finger selecting the page. She didn't know what it was she looked for. She put both her hands down on the pages, touching the woman's vertical, strong handwriting as if the words could be taken up through her palms. The book was bound in fabric-covered boards, mauves and blues, with old-fashioned, elegant endpapers that mimicked watered silk. She slid her hands back from the pages, her fingertips curling around the dusty colors of the boards, and struggled with the first words her eyes touched.

She remembered this passage well, the vivid and terrible description of squeezing and pulling out the fly larvae from beneath the skin of affected cows; and afterward Elizabeth's long musing, whether a moral relationship with domestic animals was ever possible. *When I have to impose my will on an animal, how can I not feel the animal's integrity is being sacrificed to my needs? What person would trade freedom for security, as we ask animals to do?* Elizabeth's leading may have been charismatic. The Friends had been vegetarian for years before that, but gradually Ojo farmers got away from keeping cows and dogs and horses. Only chickens, which roamed free, and cats, which never had sacrificed their integrity, were kept on the settlement, and Dolores had heard only chickens would be brought to the *Dusty Miller*. Her own feelings weren't staunch in the matter. She had sometimes thought the intimate contacts

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between a person and a domestic animal—a horse nuzzling a woman's shoulder, a cat climbing into a man's lap—if they were not fully gestures of friendship, at least were expressions of trust, and she felt such relations among animals were too rare to be trivial. But a domestic animal was plainly dependent, prisoner to the caretaker. And the smallest and weakest of free creatures—a Gray's thrush, which you could squeeze and kill with one hand—was utterly self-reliant, seeming to know what was best for itself, even as Dolores strove, tonight, to know what was best for her.

She closed the diary and opened it again at a new place. This was one of the several painful pages that came after Elizabeth had felt the little hard bead in her breast and kept the secret even from her husband, waiting for the slow doctor, the slow lab, to say if she had a cancer. Dolores knew it would be pages yet, weeks, before Elizabeth learned the lump was benign, and at last released her feelings to Marcella, her sister, her intimate, weeping in her arms, though she, Dolores, had wept with her already for days. It was old anxiety, worn edgeless by familiarity, but Dolores's eyes filled with tears, as much to do with birds and houseboats and starless nights and the bodies of the dead, as with Elizabeth Martin's fear.

She wondered suddenly, when Elizabeth wrote her secrets, who were they meant to be read by? She would always identify people. "Mary (my mother)," she would say. Or, "Arthur, my aunt's second son." Did she know, then, that her private words would be read by strangers? Why else identify these people she well knew? Who did she imagine would be reading her words, her painful confidences, needing the benefit of such naming?

Perhaps she imagined Dolores Negrete, and knew these private agonies would be held to Dolores's breast.

The paper of Dolores's own diary was grainy, cream-colored, handmade from the stalks of the kenaf they were all learning to grow for its multitude of uses on the *Dusty Miller*. On its second page, in a conscientiously neat hand, she wrote, "I am sitting on the floor of my house in the oppressive heat and drought of the verano, thinking about the forepart of my life and the after, on this day that separates them."

She had by then already written on the first page of the blank book the old, short Whitman poem that had been a favorite of her great-grandmother's, the lines that once had been painted on the side of the house, the wall that stood toward the road:

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to
speak to me, why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?"●

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A world besieged by reality storms adds a new dimension to the daily perils faced by New York's finest...

STORM TROOPER

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

The author's short story collection, *Crosstime Traffic*, will be released in February by Del Rey. Mr. Watt-Evans's most recent sales include stories to *Amazing, Aboriginal, Analog, Weird Tales*, and *IAsfm*.

The orange juice had more pulp than he liked, and was warm, as well—one of the drawbacks of eating breakfast at his desk, that.

Of course, back when he ate breakfast at home, his ex-wife had usually gotten orange juice with too much pulp in it anyway. It had generally been good and cold, though.

Mitsopoulas put the little carton aside and used the space to unfold the paper.

No new storms were mentioned; the lead story was something about the Middle East. He skipped that—it wasn't his problem. A smaller item, near the bottom of the page, was more in his line; scientists had managed to keep alive a tissue sample from the "skywhale" that a storm had dropped in a Kansas cornfield last week, and were optimistic about eventually cloning it and growing a full-sized specimen.

He snorted. What would they *do* with a two-hundred-foot lighter-than-air whale? Oh, he supposed it might have some value as a source of methane, for fuel, but it would be an awfully awkward thing to have around. For his own part he thought it was just as well that the poor creature had arrived dead. He couldn't imagine what its home reality might have been like.

The swinging door opened, and Orlando's back appeared, pushing it. He turned around and displayed a cardboard tray of styrofoam cups. "You like it black, right, Lieutenant?"

Mitsopoulas looked up. "Yeah, black." He accepted the proffered cup and pried off the plastic lid, but waited for the coffee to cool before sipping. His eyes wandered back to the newspaper.

Some fundamentalist preacher was calling for a national moment of prayer at noon. "The Lord is testing us," he was quoted as saying, "He is reshaping His creation even as we watch, to show us His power. We

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must acknowledge Him, show Him that our faith in His Word is still firm, or He will destroy us all."

Mitsopulas didn't buy that. If God wanted to send messages, there were easier ways than the reality storms. If the storms were a test of faith, the instructions were pretty damn unclear; what did a flying whale have to do with sin or salvation? How were the Nazis in the Bronx, or those poor weirdos on Coney Island, supposed to change his beliefs? It was the crazy suckers who were getting dumped who had to change their beliefs, not the ordinary people of the real world. He folded the newspaper and drank coffee.

Orlando was back, after distributing the other cups.

"So, Orlando, what've we got today?" Mitsopoulas asked.

"Nothing for sure, Lieutenant," Orlando said, shrugging. "You saw the paper."

"Nothing came in after deadline last night?"

"Not that we've gotten called on yet."

"No?" Mitsopoulas leaned back in his chair. "Funny," he said, "I thought I heard a storm last night; half woke me up."

"There *was* a storm," Orlando agreed. "About five this morning. They logged calls about some weird machines cruising over Forty-Third Street, and a lady called in about her cat turning into a vacuum cleaner or something, but the night shift didn't find anything. Must've just passed over without dumping anything, for once, the way they used to when they first started. Maybe they're slowing up again."

"We should both live so long," Mitsopoulas muttered, leaning forward again.

Orlando heard him, and retorted, "Hey, they can't go on forever!"

"No?" Mitsopoulas looked up at him and grimaced. "How do you know? Nothing like this ever happened before."

"We don't know that, Lieutenant," Orlando said contemplatively. "Maybe these things used to drive the dinosaurs nuts. Maybe it was reality storms killed the dinosaurs off, for all I know. Maybe all those stories about fairies and leprechauns were true, and they came from storms."

"Aah!" Mitsopoulas waved a hand. "That's garbage. The storms started two years ago, not back in the Dark Ages or whenever the dinosaurs lived. It's all part of the crazy times we live in, that's all."

Orlando shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"I will, just watch." He sipped coffee. "Hey, what was that about the lady's cat?"

"Oh, someone up in Turtle Bay Towers said her cat turned into a vacuum cleaner, or some piece of machinery that looked like one."

Mitsopoulas snorted. "Anybody check it out?"

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"Not in person," Orlando replied. "A sergeant took the call, someone named Derring, and told her that if the machine did anything suspicious she should call again, or bring it to the station. That was the last we heard about it."

"I know Derring," Mitsopoulas said thoughtfully. "He's as lazy a son of a bitch as you're going to find on the force."

"Hey, Lieutenant, come on!" Orlando protested. "She's probably just some old loony whose cat ran away. How could it turn into a vacuum cleaner?"

"How the hell do I know? How could three blocks in the Bronx turn into a concentration camp? How did those people in that castle out on Coney Island get in a solid stone room with no doors or windows, so it took six hours to jackhammer them out? How'd that castle get there at all?" He shrugged. "So this time it's probably just a nut with a missing cat; you want to sit around here all day? It's nice weather out there, and I could use a little drive uptown. We've got radio now, Orlando, you know that? If anything important comes up we won't miss it."

Orlando nodded reluctantly. "You're taking the whole squad?" he asked.

"Hey, that's what the rules say—we stay together as a unit, just in case. Did you boys have something better to do?" When Orlando hesitated, considering whether or not to answer, Mitsopoulas smiled and added, "On city time?"

"I guess not," Orlando conceded.

"What was it, anyway—penny ante stud?"

"Nickel-dime, dealer's choice," Orlando admitted.

"So save your money. Get the equipment on the wagon and let's go."

They went.

Fifteen minutes later the DCS van stopped for a light at Forty-Third and Third, and Mitsopoulas leaned forward, studying the streets around them. "I thought I felt something just then," he said. "Like an aftershock or something. Any of you guys feel it?"

Simons, at the wheel, shook his head, and Orlando called from the back, "Maybe it's heartburn, Lieutenant."

"Very funny," Mitsopoulas retorted, as the others snickered quietly. He knew that he had felt something, as if gravity had shifted direction for an instant, as if the common, everyday reality around him had blinked. That the others had failed to notice it didn't mean it hadn't happened; he had gotten his post as commander of the DCS squad partly because he was unusually sensitive to such phenomena.

"This was where the storm was centered last night?" he asked.

Simons nodded. "So they told me."

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"Hey, storm troopers!" someone called cheerfully from the sidewalk, waving at the van.

"Oh, jeez," Mitsopoulas said, sinking down in his seat.

"I wish they didn't call us that," Simons said.

"I know," the lieutenant agreed, "Especially after the Bronx. But I guess you can't expect kids to yell, 'Hey, Discontinuity Control Squad!' "

"No, but my kid brother calls us reality cops, and I can handle that a lot better than 'storm troopers'."

Mitsopoulas didn't answer; he was staring at the buildings on the north side of 43rd. The light changed, and Simons started the van forward.

"Turn here," Mitsopoulas told him, pointing.

Startled, Simons obeyed, belatedly yanking the wheel around hard in order to make the corner. "I thought we were going up to 46th," he said when he had the van safely in lane.

Mitsopoulas was staring out at the building immediately east of the familiar facade of the Church of St. Agnes. "I thought so too," he replied. "But we're not; stop here."

Simons eased the van over, double-parking it in front of the indicated building. "What is it?" he asked.

"Look at the sign."

Simons looked and read, "New York City Internal Security, Midtown Boo-ro. B-U-R-O? I never saw 'bureau' spelled like that."

"And I never heard of the New York Internal Security," Mitsopoulas said.

"You don't think it's just some rent-a-cop outfit?" Orlando asked from the back.

"I don't know—but that's a damn big building for a rent-a-cop operation I never heard of, and besides, it wasn't here the last time I came past."

"That sign doesn't look new," Simons said doubtfully.

"I know," Mitsopoulas replied grimly.

"Are you sure it wasn't here?"

"Hey, don't argue, all right? I'm sure; it doesn't go right with the church."

"So they had a bad architect . . ."

"That's not what I mean, I mean I remember it being different. I don't know every block in the city, but I know St. Agnes, and that's not the building that should be next to it."

Simons stared for a moment. "You mean it's part of a reality dump? The report was on 46th, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Mitsopoulas said, "It was."

"That's another three blocks, Lieutenant, and on the other side of Third

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Avenue; if it were that big, wouldn't we have gotten a lot more word on it already?"

"I'd like to think so," Mitsopoulas said quietly. "Maybe we got two separate spots. One way or another, though, we check this place out."

Simons shrugged. "Okay, Lieutenant, but maybe it's just your memory playing tricks."

"My memory doesn't play tricks." Mitsopoulas opened the door and got out; on the other side Simons followed suit, and the rest of the team crept forward between the seats to follow.

In accordance with standard practice, four of the men, including Mitsopoulas, formed a line facing the building, spaced at arm's length; Mabuchi stood back a pace, scanning the opposite sidewalk and to either side. Orlando stayed in the van, sitting with one leg out the open door, the radio mike in his hand, ready to call for help, or to leap out to provide back-up, or to jump back in and flee. All but Orlando had their guns drawn and pointed skyward.

In the center of the line, facing the door of "New York City Internal Security's" midtown bureau, Mitsopoulas felt a rush of adrenaline; the palm that was wrapped around the butt of his gun was sweaty, and his throat was dry. It was always this way at first, when he faced a complete unknown that could be literally *anything*. Once he found out what was inside that building, once he knew something, he could be calm again, no matter how bizarre or dangerous it might be; it was the not knowing that affected him, not any actual threat.

He knew his men did not necessarily feel the same way; he thought that all of them must be calmer than he, and Simons, on his right, looked just as cool as if he were on the firing range back at headquarters.

Well, they didn't understand as well as he did. The people in the reality dumps could be complete wackos. There could be things in there that weren't people at all. The dumps might not come from the real world, but they were solid and dangerous all the same. Two men died capturing the camp in the Bronx.

He took the first step forward, toward the three low steps leading up to the door, but then he stopped and snapped his gun down into firing position.

The door was opening.

Mitsopoulas glimpsed a sleek black uniform, dark hair, a pale face, and then whoever had opened the door spotted the line of men outside, the six cops, the storm troopers, and he—or just possibly she—ducked back in, out of sight.

The door did not close again, however; a crack remained, too narrow for Mitsopoulas to see anything through.

"Look for cover," Mitsopoulas said, "But stand your ground for now."

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From the corner of his eye he could see Weinberg nodding an acknowledgement, and O'Donnell, on the other side, passing the order on to Simons.

"Orlando," he called, "Pass the bullhorn."

Orlando obeyed, handing it to Weinberg, who passed it to Mitsopoulas. He took it, turned it on, and raised it.

As he did, he noticed that a crowd was beginning to collect on the sidewalks. "Mabuchi," he called over his shoulder, "Keep those gawkers back."

Then, using the bullhorn, he called, "You in the building, the one that says Internal Security! This is the police! We want to talk—send someone out, unarmed!"

He lowered the loud-hailer and waited. On either side, his men waited with him.

A moment later a window on the second floor slid up, and an amplified voice called out, "Who did you say you were?"

"Damn," Mitsopoulas muttered. He raised the horn.

"This is Lieutenant Gregory Mitsopoulas, of the New York Police Department. Who's in there?"

For a long moment there was only silence; then the amplified voice said, "We have you covered. Throw down your weapons and we'll talk."

The barrel of a rifle, black and menacing, slid out across the second-story windowsill.

"Oh, shit," Mitsopoulas said. "Take cover!"

The men scattered, behind parked cars and a *Daily News* box. Mitsopoulas himself ducked back to the van and crouched by Orlando's knee, behind the open door.

"*This is the police*," he bellowed through the bullhorn. "Nobody's been hurt here, and we want to keep it that way. We just want to talk. No guns. Send someone out!"

"Listen," the voice from the building replied, "I don't know who you are really, but if you're the police, who the hell do you think is in here?"

Mitsopoulas blinked, and read the sign again.

Internal Security.

Yeah, that might mean police somewhere, but in New York?

Besides, he knew perfectly well who the cops were here.

But then, there had been a reality storm last night, and it was clear that this building was from some *other* New York. Were the occupants unaware of what had happened?

Maybe, somehow, they were.

Well, then, someone had to explain it to them. That was simple enough.

And figuring out whose job the explanation was wasn't too tricky, either.

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"This is Lieutenant Mitsopoulas," he called. "I'm going to leave my gun here and come inside to talk to you."

After a moment's hesitation, the voice replied, "Come ahead. Keep your hands where we can see them."

Mitsopoulas muttered to himself as he handed the bullhorn and his service revolver to Orlando.

"You guys be careful out here," he said. Then he stood up, raised his hands to shoulder height, palms out, and walked across Forty-Third Street and up the three steps.

The heavy front door was still ajar; he pushed it open with one toe and leaned in.

"Hello," he called, "Anyone here?"

Two men with drawn guns appeared at the opposite end of a small, dingy hallway. They wore sleek one-piece black uniforms that didn't look much like any cop suits Mitsopoulas had ever seen—more like something athletic, though no bike racer or ice skater would have added the equipment-laden Sam Browne belts. The lieutenant wiggled his fingers. "I'm clean," he called. "See?"

One man frisked him while the other kept him covered. Neither spoke. They looked through his wallet and inspected his badge, and kept them both, as well as the cuffs and a few other items he had been carrying.

When they were satisfied that he was unarmed they took him to a small, bare room with three wooden chairs and a hanging light—Interrogation, obviously.

Mitsopoulas sighed and played along, taking the suspect's chair. One man stayed to guard him; the other stepped out.

A moment later another, older man entered, wearing a variant of the same black uniform, but trimmed in gold at the cuffs. He took a seat.

Mitsopoulas waited to see whether he would be offered a hand to shake. He wasn't.

"So," the questioner asked, "who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Gregory Mitsopoulas, N.Y.P.D. I assume you read the I.D. I had on me."

The other man nodded.

"I take it you don't believe it, for some reason," Mitsopoulas said.

The other smiled a tight, humorless little smile.

"Mind if I ask who you are?" Mitsopoulas said, smiling back.

"Aaron Fitzwater, Bureau Commandant, New York City Internal Security," the other replied.

Mitsopoulas nodded. "I figured it was something like that. And in your New York City, you guys are the only cops there are, right? So when you saw us lined up out there like that, you must have thought you had a goddamn revolt on your hands, right?"

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Fitzwater stared silently for a moment, then asked, "*Your* New York City? Is there more than one, then?"

"Sure is. So I guess you guys didn't have reality storms where you came from? At least, not until the one that dumped you here?"

"Mr. Mitsopoulas," Fitzwater said, "You aren't making much sense."

Mitsopoulas sighed. "You don't have the storms. Okay, just bear with me for a couple of minutes, all right? It's gonna sound stupid, but let me talk. That okay?"

Fitzwater nodded. "Say your piece," he said.

"Okay," Mitsopoulas said. He took a breath, and began.

"Two years ago we started getting what we call reality storms—and when I say we, I don't just mean me, or New York, I mean the whole friggin' world. For anywhere from about half a second to a couple of hours, the whole world goes nuts in a certain area—things appear and disappear, or change shape, the air can change, the light, colors, everything. Sometimes gravity or even time itself is affected. The size of the storm can range from . . . well, we don't know the lower limit, but the smallest one anyone's confirmed was about the size of a breadbox. That one lasted about a minute and a half. The biggest one reported so far was over the mid-Atlantic, thank God, and was estimated at five miles long and two miles wide. We don't know what's causing them; nobody does, or at least nobody we know of. There are lots of theories, of course—that Judgment Day is approaching, that reality's coming apart at the seams, that it's all just illusions or mass hysteria. My personal favorite theory is that some scientist somewhere in some other universe is screwing around with space-time or something, and we're getting caught in the backwash, but we don't really know." He spread his palms. "So," he asked, "You heard about anything like that?"

Fitzwater calmly answered, "No."

Mitsopoulas shook his head. "Too bad," he said. "Then you probably think I'm nuts. I'm not, though—it's true. These weird storms are happening, and during them the whole world is warped out of shape—up can be down, or you can get heavier or lighter, light and sound do strange things, people see mysterious things in the sky. Weird stuff."

"Go on," Fitzwater said.

"Okay," Mitsopoulas said agreeably, "You're humoring me, that's good. It's a start, anyway. Thanks. So, anyway, sometimes, after particularly bad storms, there are bits of reality that have been changed permanently, and we get strange things left behind—bits and pieces of other worlds. And yeah, that means that parts of our world are gone, and no, we don't know where they went, and no, none of them have ever come back again. They're just gone, and we've got other stuff there instead, stuff that doesn't always make sense. Like a flying whale—a dead one, with all its

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gas sacs ruptured, turned up in a Kansas cornfield; that drove the science guys nuts. I don't know about you, but nobody in *my* world had ever seen a flying whale before, or any other animal that was lighter than air." Mitsopoulas shook his head. "Hell of a thing."

"Go on," Fitzwater repeated.

"Sure. Well, anyway, we get a lot of these in New York—maybe it's got something to do with population density, or maybe with all the electronics stuff around here. Whatever, New York gets more than its share, so the city put together a special team to deal with all the bits of other realities that get left behind. We call it the Discontinuity Control Squad, and me and my men, we're it."

Fitzwater nodded slowly.

"Lieutenant," he said, "I told you a lie a couple of minutes ago. We've had a few incidents such as you describe—not on the scale your world apparently has, assuming you're telling me the truth, but we've had a few. We don't call them reality storms; we call them illusion zones. The official doctrine is that the things in them aren't real. We, too, have a special team to deal with them—we call them Zone Police. The street name is the dream police."

Mitsopoulas grimaced. "They call us storm troopers," he said.

Fitzwater smiled his little smile again. "So I don't think you're crazy," he said.

Mitsopoulas smiled back. "That's a relief," he said.

"At least, not crazy in the usual way. I don't think you're real at all."

Mitsopoulas started. His smile vanished. "What?"

"Not real in *our* world, anyway. So you and your men were caught in one of these reality storms, as you call them, and you found yourself in our world?"

"Hey, no," Mitsopoulas said. "*You* guys, *you* were caught. You're in *my* world."

Fitzwater's smile vanished as well. "Nonsense, Lieutenant," he said. "Look around you. This is *my* world, my bureau."

"Yeah, it's your bureau," Mitsopoulas said, "Because your whole building got it, around five o'clock this morning."

As he spoke, though, a slithering uneasiness slipped into the back of his mind.

If the building had made the transition at five A.M., why was the full daytime crew here? Why hadn't any of them noticed the transition? And there had been that little twinge while waiting at the light on Third Avenue.

Fitzwater was definitely not smiling now; his face looked hard as granite, far harder than the acoustic-tile walls. "I'm afraid you're mistaken," he said. "You and your men are the strangers here—the invaders. Now,

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if you would kindly order them all to come in here, I'm sure we can make arrangements."

"Arrangements," Mitsopoulas said, feeling cold, "What kind of arrangements?" New York City Internal Security, they called it. Security, like the Committee for State Security—the KGB. Or the Rumanian Securitate. These weren't just cops, like himself and his men; he was sure of it. They were the secret police, the enforcers, the midnight knock on the door.

Dream police, illusion zones—so what did they do with the very real things that were left behind? And the very real people? In Mitsopoulas' New York there were eleven people out in Queens who thought they were wizards, people who were being taught English and offered vocational training. There were three hundred survivors of the camp in the Bronx in the city hospitals, recovering. There was an exact double of a Wall Street broker who was trying to set himself up in a new line of work. There were half a dozen unidentified creatures in the Bronx Zoo, and a warehouse in Brooklyn half full of unidentified *things*.

Nobody called any of that stuff an illusion. Insane, maybe, but not illusion. How can you call it illusion when there's so much evidence?

You'd have to get rid of the evidence before you could say it was all an illusion.

"Come with me, Lieutenant," Fitzwater said. "And we'll get your men in here."

"Commandant," he said, "I think you're making a mistake. This is *my* world, my New York. I can prove it." To himself, Mitsopoulas prayed, Oh, God, I *hope* it's my New York.

"How?" Fitzwater demanded, his voice cold, and Mitsopoulas knew that this was life and death, that Fitzwater and the N.Y.C. Internal Security men were not playing games.

He had to escape, to get out of here somehow.

But if he did, then what? What if this really *wasn't* his familiar world?

He didn't know what happened to people who vanished in the storms, but he knew one thing—they never came back. In the two years since the storms began, none had ever come back.

His ex-wife, his daughter, the stenographer he'd taken out to dinner Saturday, he'd never see them again if he had been shifted into another reality. New York was still here, so the world couldn't be too different, but his job was gone, and who knew what else? Were the Mets in this world? Who was president, if anyone? What sort of a world *was* it?

Judging by the people he'd seen, not a good one.

"Well," he said, "Seems to me a little drive downtown to look at the sights should settle the matter. If my office is still there at Police Plaza, it's my world, right?"

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"Police Plaza?"

Mitsopoulas nodded. "Downtown," he said.

"Not in this world," Fitzwater said.

"You mean not in *your* world," Mitsopoulas replied.

"This *is* my world," Fitzwater snapped.

"Prove it," Mitsopoulas snapped back.

"This is a trick," Fitzwater said. "You're planning to escape somehow, once you're outside the building."

"Why should I escape?" Mitsopoulas retorted. "You don't mean me any harm, do you?"

"Of course not," Fitzwater replied reflexively. He stared at Mitsopoulas for a long moment.

It was Mitsopoulas who broke the silence.

"Listen," he said, "To hell with the bullshit. You kill your dump survivors, don't you? So you can keep up the pretense that it's all illusion, and there's nothing seriously wrong?"

Fitzwater drew his gun and pointed it between Mitsopoulas' eyes. Mitsopoulas held up a hand.

"Wait a minute," he said, hoping his voice wouldn't crack, "Just wait a minute, okay? Before you go shooting *anybody*, just wait a minute. Think it through. You don't want to kill me, not yet; my men out there are armed, and know how to take care of themselves. They aren't going to listen to you unless I tell them to. And however sure you are which world we're in, what harm would it do to check? Call someone, will you? Just use the phone or the radio and call someone, see which world we're in. If it's yours . . ." Mitsopoulas heard his voice shake; he took a deep breath and continued, "If it's yours, I'll call my men in, we'll surrender, on condition you let us live. Exile us, send us to Australia or somewhere, anything you like, we'll keep our mouths shut, you don't need to kill us. I swear you don't. But first, just check it out, okay? Use the phone."

"The phones are out," Fitzwater snapped. "They've been out all morning. The whole building—offices, barracks, officers' quarters, all of it. We figure a main must have broken."

Hope leaped in Mitsopoulas' chest.

The phones were out. And they *lived* here, in a barracks—they hadn't commuted.

"Your phones are out—don't you see?" he said. "They've been out since five, right?"

Fitzwater lowered the gun slightly. His jaw tightened.

"What about the radio?" Mitsopoulas asked.

"We don't use radio," Fitzwater said.

Mitsopoulas groped for a moment for the next idea, and said, "Hey,

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but *we* do! Listen, let me talk to my men—let me tell them to call for back-up. Don't you see? If anyone responds, then it's *our* world out there!"

Fitzwater brought the gun back to his shoulder. "And if no one comes?"

"Then we'll surrender. If you'll guarantee our safety."

He almost hadn't bothered adding the condition; he doubted that Fitzwater's promises would be worth anything. If this was truly Fitzwater's world, then barring a miracle, he and his men were as good as dead.

He prayed for a miracle as Fitzwater considered.

"All right," the commandant said at last. "Come on."

He led the way out of the room and down the dingy hallway; two of his men fell in behind, keeping their guns ready, keeping a close eye on the prisoner—for there was no longer any pretense that Mitsopoulas was anything but a prisoner.

At the door, Fitzwater stepped to one side and said, "Talk to them—but if you take one step out the door, my men will shoot."

Mitsopoulas nodded.

"Hey, Orlando!" he shouted, hands cupped around his mouth, "Call for back-up! Lots of back-up!"

He saw Orlando's head bob up, and a hand wave in acknowledgment. He thought he heard the crackle of the van's radio.

And then there was nothing to do but wait.

He stood in the doorway, two drawn pistols at his back, and waited.

"Hey," he asked after a minute, "Take a look around—does this look like your New York? You got St. Agnes right there?"

"Of course we do," Fitzwater snarled, without bothering to look.

It wasn't until a few seconds later, when the first siren sounded coming up Third Avenue, that Fitzwater looked.

Another siren shrieked, this one somewhere to the west, probably coming across on Forty-Second Street. Fitzwater stared.

The first of the familiar blue-and-white sedans pulled up, and then a second, and a third, lights flashing, and Mitsopoulas had to fight down an urge to giggle as Fitzwater's jaw sagged.

This was going to be rough, dealing with these people. They weren't harmless innocents, like the camp inmates or the magicians. They weren't criminals, like the camp guards who were up on charges of assault, battery, kidnapping, and a hundred other charges. They were dangerous—but they weren't technically criminals.

God, Mitsopoulas thought, the things the reality storms dumped!

"Don't worry," he said. "We don't kill anyone. Nobody here ever pretended the storms weren't real, and we're all a bunch of goddamn humanitarians compared to you guys. We're soft; you'll do fine, all of you."

Fitzwater made a strangled noise as car after car discharged New York cops with guns drawn.

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"I'd suggest," Mitsopoulas said loudly, "That you put your guns down and come out with your hands up."

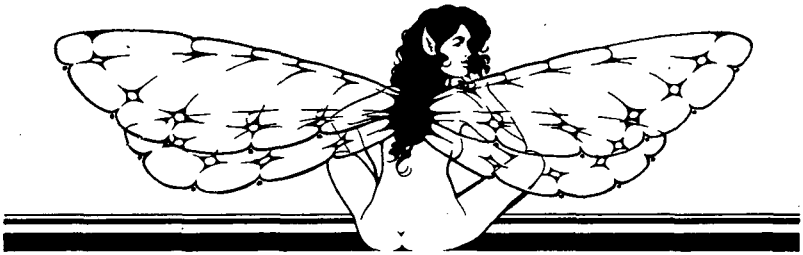
It took a long, long moment, but at last the three men in black did that, and Gregory Mitsopoulas walked down the three low steps onto the familiar pavement of his very own New York.

It felt good to be home.

Of course, he had never really left. It had been his own world all along.

"My world," he said to himself, savoring it. "My world."

Then he added, with a shudder, "This time."●



NEXT ISSUE

New writer **R. Garcia y Robertson** returns to these pages next month with a big, fast-paced, exciting new novella, our February cover story, "The Virgin and the Dinosaur." This is a prequel to last year's popular "By the Time We Got to Gaugamela," *this* one showing us how Jake and Peg, our bumbling team of time-traveling documentary film-makers, got together to form *Time Tours Unlimited* in the first place. This time, they head for the Upper Cretaceous, for a vivid, funny, action-packed romp through history, complete with zeppelins, Sioux warriors, *haute cuisine*, sex, hurricanes, and *lots* of dinosaurs, many of them hungry ones with great big teeth. This one is pure entertainment at its best, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN FEBRUARY: popular new writer **Allen Steele** takes us aloft to near-Earth orbit in the near future, for the taut story of some astronauts in the midst of a life-or-death crisis who come face to face with the hardest choices of their careers, in "Sugar's Blues"; that master of horror **S.P. Somtow** (also known as **Somtow Sucharitkul**) takes us to modern-day Peru

(Continued on page 167)

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NOSTALGIA FOR THE INFINITE

by Robert Frazier & Andrew Joron

Black desk, white paper
—impossible to get work done today
Or any day
I take off my glasses
    there's nothing left for me to see

Long ago I defined space
As a *nothingness knotted with infinite variables*
Now I know it's just nothingness, knotted
No more than that

    let me admit it, finally
    I am unable
To visualize this so-called "polyspace"
Invented (discovered?) by my younger colleagues
—their readouts fan across my lap
While I doze in my office through the hot afternoon

A sharp knocking startles me
but I don't answer, so the student slips his paper
    under the door

I have completed my memoirs
Atop the manuscript, the glass weight
    with prize coin embedded

"Growing old"—my own aphorism
"Reduces one to particulars"
No, no: cross it out, again & again

Once I could measure facets within
    a dimensionless point

In the dream, I was sitting naked
    in my office *but it was not a dream*
& someone is knocking at the door again

A shadow behind the frosted window
In the mirror, behind the mask
My life recedes: a motionless fall
    down crystalline corridors
    forever

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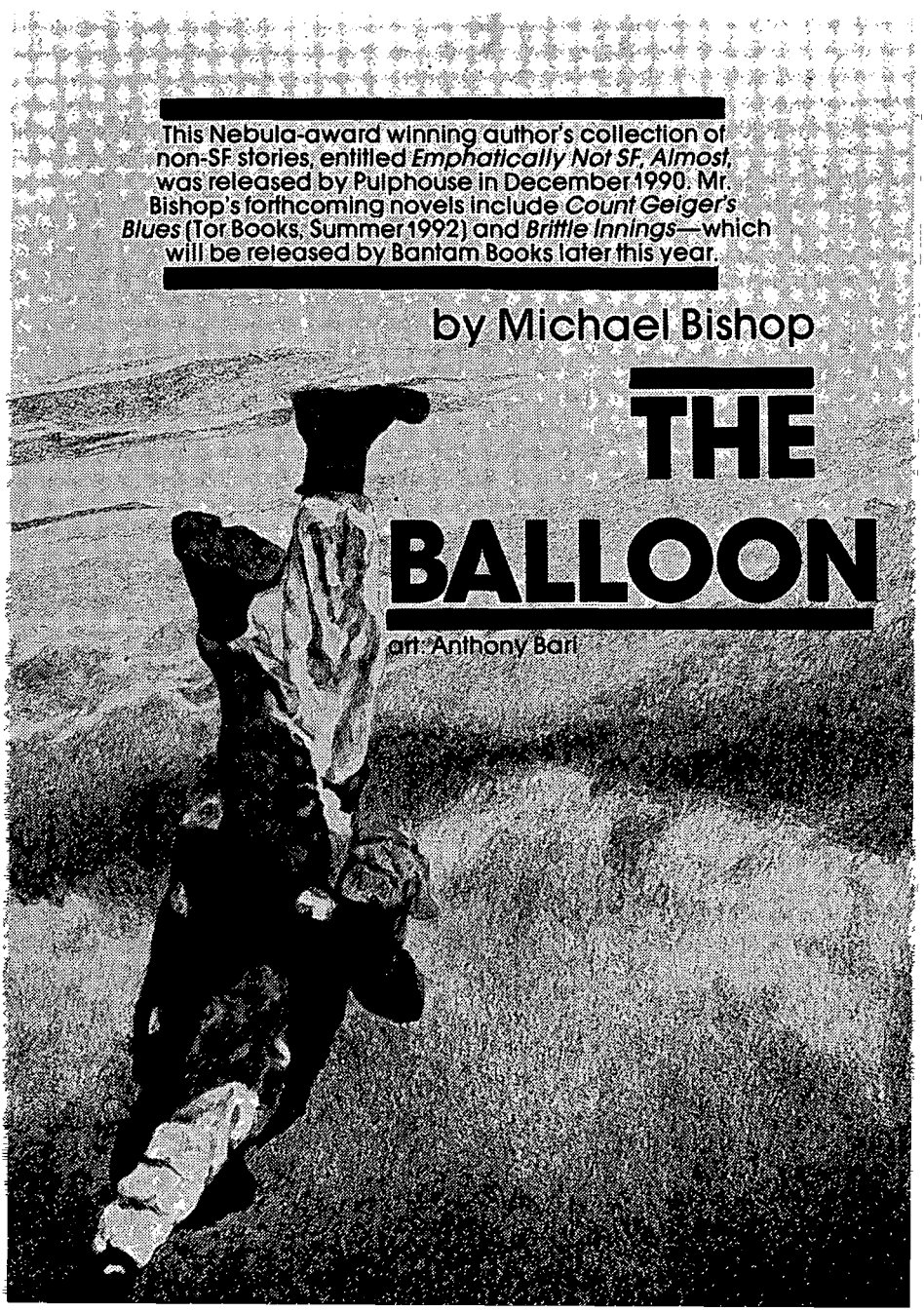
This Nebula-award winning author's collection of non-SF stories, entitled *Emphatically Not SF, Almost*, was released by Pulphouse in December 1990. Mr. Bishop's forthcoming novels include *Count Geiger's Blues* (Tor Books, Summer 1992) and *Brittle Innings*—which will be released by Bantam Books later this year.

by Michael Bishop

THE BALLOON

art: Anthony Bart



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It was Balloon Day in Ms. Randolph's class. Each of her kids was to release into the streaky Dakota sky a helium balloon bearing a message of peace for whoever found it and retrieved from its pastel skin the slip of paper nestled like a fragile blossom inside it.

On each palely gridded leaf of notebook paper, Ms. Randolph had asked them to write a peace slogan, their name, and Rugby Middle School's address. Together, these slips would constitute a barrage of hopeful admonitions that only an arms maker could withstand, even if each message was, in fact, too pollyannaish to really work in the conflict-ridden western hemisphere.

INVEST IN PEACE.

MAKE LOVE OR MONEY—NOT WAR.

WAR IS NOT HEALTHY FOR SMALL CHILDREN AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE.

THE REAL PRISONERS OF WAR ARE THOSE WHO SUPPORT IT.

WHAT IF THEY GAVE A WAR AND EVERYONE WAS TOO BUSY BEING BULLISH TO BECOME BELLIGERENTS?

WAR IS NOT COST-EFFECTIVE. CONSIDER THIS: DEAD PEOPLE DON'T PAY TAXES.

And so on. Old-fashioned hippiespeak recycled in weird combos with out-of-date yuppieguff.

Thirty kids burst out of the school, flowed down the steps in a riot of jitterbugging knees, cocked elbows, and rowdy shouts. Then they rolled along in a sniggering burlesque of good behavior toward the schoolyard where, every recess in dry weather, the boys played tag or softball and the girls jumped rope or swung or milled around together talking.

"What are you putting in your balloon?" Lydia Benkelman asked Brent Sarcoxie, a fellow seventh-grader.

"Air," Brent said.

"I mean, you know, what *message*?"

Brent turned aside. His only wish was to boycott Balloon Day. It was a crock. Ms. Randolph was a peace freak. The police action in Mexico, the territorial spats with Canada, the shooting war over water rights in the Rocky Mountain states—you couldn't just make kissy-face noises at such things, quote old Pete Seeger songs, and pretend the issues involved weren't worth fighting for.

If you did that, you spat on the bones of brave dudes like Brent's daddy, who, two years ago, had taken a handlaser hit in a Minot Brigade assault on Winnipeg in the Annexation Tiff of '09. Shoot, if you did that, you might as well go to Europe, where lard-bottomed geezers *talked* out their problems.

Brent wanted to go back inside. They were missing a satellite feed from the Peruvian incursion. For what? Another nutty balloon fly. It

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was an outrage, practically. If Daddy was alive, he'd be picketing these stupid festivities.

Ms. Randolph, strapping in a calico pioneer dress, got between Brent and the school building. She towered over him. Her smiling, ruddy face was a no-nonsense stop sign.

"You can't go back in before we're finished, Mr. Sarcoxie."

"Not even to answer Nature's call?"

"You've answered it twice this morning. I think you'll last."

"What if I don't?"

Ms. Randolph looked at Lydia Benkelman and sidelong past her at Brent's friends Webb Killdeer and Johnny Zahl. "I guess we'd have to chip in and buy you a box of security garments for our next trip outside." Webb and Johnny snorted. Lydia—a pox on her beanpole frame and puppy-belly freckles—helplessly giggled.

"He doesn't have a message slip for his balloon," Lydia said, clearly trying to stifle her giggles.

"That won't do," Ms. Randolph told Brent. "You can't send up a balloon without a message. Pick one of the sample sayings I put on the board. Or write one of your own."

Brent couldn't imagine sending aloft a message like MAKE LOVE OR MONEY—NOT WAR. It insulted his dad's memory. It was naïve, unheroic, and mercenary, all at the same time. So he said he'd do a message of his own, and Ms. Randolph gave him a notebook and a felt-tipped pen and guided him to a picnic table on the edge of the gravel yard from which their balloons would soon go flying.

"Chop-chop, Mr. Sarcoxie. You're holding us all up. Lydia's getting chilly."

Brent hunched over the notebook, considering. Eventually, he printed a message. Then he reconsidered, wrote a second slogan on another page, reconsidered again, tapped his pen on the table, tore out a page, handed it to Ms. Randolph.

She read his slogan aloud: " 'THE BUSINESS OF WAR IS TO PRODUCE PEACE. ENLIST IN THAT BUSINESS TODAY.' "

Ms. Randolph's brow furrowed. His message, Brent knew, had a wonky pool-ball English on it that troubled her. But it *was* a call for peace. She had no grounds to make him write a toe-the-party-line substitute. After all, he was sitting on his real feelings and following her directions. Ms. Randolph distractedly handed his slogan back to him.

"Okay," she said. "Okay." But her brow stayed corrugated, and when she started walking toward the helium dispenser where all the other kids were jostling for a place, she swished her calico skirts as if trying to ward off out-of-season horse flies.

Brent wadded up the message that she had just okayed and tossed it

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into a nearby trash barrel. Then he ripped out the first slogan he'd written, folded it into a packet small enough to push through the lips of an uninflated balloon, and swaggered to the noisy queue at the helium dispenser.

When it came his turn to take a balloon, he asked for the only black one in a shallow box of multicolored latex skins, pushed his slogan through the balloon's narrow throat, and gave it to Mr. Coy, an aide to Ms. Randolph, to plump out with helium.

With a whistling hiss and a rubbery snap, that flimsy skin grew into a mother-of-pearl globe. It bobbed in Mr. Coy's fist, holding Brent's message in a taut ashen membrane and simultaneously mocking the gaiety of all the other balloons.

"Great!" Ms. Randolph cried a moment later. *"Let them go!"*

Brent's classmates—Lydia, Webb, Johnny, and all the rest—let their balloons soar. Brent hung on to his until it began to be obvious that he still had it, then lifted it over his head, made a rude kissing noise, and released his, too.

A fleet of tiny globular ships—color by Crayola, jelly bean, and fruity Jell-O gelatin.

Climbing below and behind the main armada of kaleidoscopically colliding balloons, Brent's balloon was a sullen period chasing its colorful message-bearing siblings into the mottled parchment of the late-spring sky.

What a crock. The only good thing about this exercise, Brent decided, was that he hadn't had to read aloud from Hamlin Garland or Willa Cather. . . .

Seven years later, on the Fourth of July, at a video-disco in suburban Bismarck, Brent Sarcoxie was telling a B-girl by the name of Blaisdell all about his rotten childhood.

Daddy dead in aught-nine. Mama a spaced-out image-addict in a home for veterans' dependents in Fargo, unable three years later to cope with her widowhood. And his big sister Wing in Mountain Home, Idaho, turning high-vol eroto-tek tricks for any lonely flyboy with credit to burn and ready-to-hand proof of six or more flak-harassed sorties against the Calgarians.

"Poor kiddo," Blaisdell said. Whatever she was clad in, which wasn't that much, kept changing colors, sending shadows and bright amoeboid highlights all over her most salient contours.

Before too long, memory-stimmed by the chameleonic spectrum of her clinglet, he told her about Balloon Day. How he hated it. How Ms. Randolph's every move, word, study assignment had almost made him upchuck. And how, on the last Balloon Day ever held in Pierce County, he'd

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managed a sneaky sort of defiance against the woman's mush-brained peacemaking efforts

"Balloon Day," Blaisdell said. "Sounds neat."

"It was stupid. A complete waste of time."

Blaisdell ignored the contempt in his voice. "Did anybody ever find one? The balloons, I mean—the messages inside them. Did they tell you they had?"

"The wind was from the east that day. Some of our balloons got snagged in power lines. Some popped in midair. But we got back a letter from a farm wife in Divide County and another from a peace-freak enlisted fellow at Minot Air Force Base. Nothing from out of state, though. Nothing from over the border."

"One of your balloons got all the way to Divide County? Wow." Blaisdell was impressed. "It's like putting a message in a bottle and throwing it into the ocean. An act of faith, sort of. I think that's high sorcery, honey."

"Yeah, well, Ms. Randolph probably didn't." (When had this gal ever seen an ocean? Never, Sarcoxie would wager.) "That woman in Divide County was a down-to-the-ground patriot. Her husband too, I guess. She wrote on their behalf. She wrote Ms. Randolph, and our school board, and all the media, and the governor. About two weeks later, Ms. Randolph was gone. A retired fighter jock took over for her and finished out the year."

"How shitty," Blaisdell said.

"It should've happened sooner." Sarcoxie threw back a tumbler of Bottineau bourbon. "She was lucky it didn't. Rugby's a hawk's town, the Dakotas are hawkish. The North Country Fair—fight for it or flee. Love it or elope. Put up or pack it in.

"I mean, the lady was lucky to last as long as she did. If us kids didn't complain to our folks about Balloon Day—and, hey, *I* didn't have any folks to gripe *to*—it was because, in class, she could damn-near hypnotize you into treason. Ms. Randolph had this clean-cheeked, Earth-Mother charisma. Sometimes—just *sometimes*, now—she'd almost seem to be making sense."

"Maybe she was. Look how well Europe's doing."

Sarcoxie hacked derisively. "Blaisdell, don't you want to hear how I flimflammed her?"

"I'd rather think about all those pretty balloons flying off to other places, carrying their messages of hope. Maybe a few of them are still up there."

"My lord, gal. *Come on.*"

Blaisdell looked at Sarcoxie. "All right. Okay."

It occurred to him that she was peevishly humoring him, pulling him along for tips and after-hours tapas. Well, that was her job.

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"The message I sent up was for the canks who killed my daddy in Manitoba. I printed it out big and neat: 'WHOEVER FINDS THIS, YOU LOUSY SONUVA, MAY YOU DIE A *REALLY* SLOW DEATH.' That's what *I* sent up. In a balloon the color of a shroud."

"Good thing that woman over in Divide didn't find it. She'd've probably tried to get the governor to award Ms. Randolph a medal or something. You'd've never got rid of her."

"Blaisdell, don't be smart."

"Nobody's ever accused me of that. And now that you've joined the Devil's Lake Berets, they won't accuse you, either."

Sarcoxie wasn't drunk. He could still tell an insult when he heard it. He pushed a C-spot at Blaisdell, watched her clinglet ripple through a miniature rain forest of patterns and hues, pulled his denim beret from his belt, placed it at a jaunty angle on his head, and ambled—carefully, carefully—toward the wind lock of the videogrot.

A disabled vet on a stool up front was selling Independence Day banners. He snapped Sarcoxie a salute and asked wouldn't he like to help a wounded bro'. Sarcoxie returned the salute and gave the D.V. a double-tenner. He didn't take a pennant.

Outside, the wind was howling, whipping down the street like a J-bomb back-blast. It was good to chugalug the roaring night, but even better to be away from that ditzy bar girl.

One month later, huddled against the stealth-copter's bulkhead with six other berets, Sarcoxie got ready to jump into the woods near the Whiteshell Nuclear Research Establishment. Some Manitoban fifth-columnists were working on the ground to make their plotted sabotage of the heavily guarded facility come off, but Lt. Noonan was nervous. Worse, his nervousness was spreading like a flu bug from man to man along their jump-line.

What a jerk, Sarcoxie thought. Noonan wouldn't even be here if his daddy weren't a Four Star with a chestful of ribbons from the Republican Guard, the Panama, and the Ottawa walkovers.

"Everything's hunky-dory," Lt. Noonan said, the quaver in his voice belying his words.

What was hunky-dory about it, Sarcoxie thought, was that Noonan wasn't jumping with them. He was their stealth-copter cheerleader, a stay-aloft with a radio. Good. On the ground, they needed guys who knew what to do and didn't mind doing it.

In the high August dark, the copter banked, the pilot yelled an instruction from the cockpit, Noonan called out something in reply, and, blam, blam, blam, blam, blam, blam, blam, the members of their in-

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terdiction-team were plummeting toward the black-green shadows of the Whiteshell shield forest in their gliderchutes.

Ruddering to one side and then the other. Angling across the white-noise rush of a midnight wind. Keeping one another in view through their nightscope goggles. Interlinking via throatmikes and earphones. Gyro-orienting in their gliderchute harnesses. Slaving like doolies to keep their bungholes tight.

A jolt. A dip. A painful careening away from the main body of glide-chuters.

Sarcoxie realized that one of two things had happened. Either he'd been bull's-eyed by a miniwinder or the fabric of his glide wing had ripped and tattered. Deadeye ground-to-air marksmanship? A flaw in the synthasilk?

Just now, it didn't matter much. He was going down, and he had absolutely no control over either the direction or the speed of his dropping. The really sad thing was that this Whiteshell sabotage would have been his first honest-to-God chance to kick some canker butt for what the lousy winnies had done to his father. Now, all he had to look forward to was buying the farm. He was totally out of control, totally out of formation, falling, the wind through his denim leggings and his quilted flak jacket like the Zephyr Express to some godforsaken nowhere.

In fact, Sarcoxie thought, maybe the best thing about this way of buying it was that it would be snap-your-neck fast. No muss, no fuss, no waiting.

He tore his nightscope goggles off, flung them into the howling Manitoban dark. His earphones immediately followed. He unbelted from gliderchute harness. He twisted out of his flak jacket, which flapped off to nowhere like a flailing bat. If you were going to die, you might as well jettison as much shit as you could. Babies were born naked, and it seemed to Sarcoxie, in his helpless tumble, that the closer you could get to naked when you were about to check out the better. He lacked the suppleness in his remaining uniform to double over, undo his boots, and shed them too, but he'd've been happy to try if there'd been more time.

Unidentifiable foliage—needles, twigs, grenade-like cones—basketed him. They scraped, tore, gave way, grabbed again. They hammocked and snagged the floppy rag doll of his body. In some of that cracking and ripping, Sarcoxie felt sure, there had echoed not only ruin for the canopies of the jack pines and balsams that had broken (apt word) his fall, but also godawful damage to his spine, liver, spleen, and lungs. He was dangling—at Albertosaurus eye-level, had there been Albertosauruses alive to eye him—near the top of a fir wracked by the slashing of a human meteorite.

Crap, someone said. A croak in the sighing darkness, the sad gulp of

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a man-sized tree frog. Had he said the word aloud or only in his head? Before he could ask himself that question again, he passed out.

When he awoke, it was still dark, still cold. The pain awash in all his systems reproached him so stingingly that he wanted to pass out again. How could a guy hurt so much? What was he doing here, anyway? Where were his fellow berets?

Was the glow visible through the forest—a vast green patina behind the shaggy silhouettes of the intervening trees—evidence that they'd pulled off their mission? Or simply evidence that his eyes weren't working too well? You could argue the question both ways. Whenever Sarcoxie moved his head, a blur followed the motion and fireflies danced.

God, God, God, God, *God!*

Let me die, he thought. Let me die.

A specter appeared to him.

Actually, it was a round grey face drifting through the prickly labyrinth of the forest canopy. It had no body, though—just as, in a sense, he himself had no body, only a phantom extension of his consciousness throbbing insistently beneath his neck. Luckily, the round grey face bobbing toward him was approaching from a favorable angle. He could watch it coming without too much rubbernecking or visual adjustment. Why was it haunting him? What did it want? He tried to cry out, but he had no voice.

Apparently, plummeting through the tree, he had punctured his throat, decommissioning his vocal cords. Even so, that round grey face was coming on, navigating the fringed lagoons of the evergreen forest as if it had eyes in its latex noggin. As if it were homing on a come-hither in his jumper's breast pocket.

Of course, that was impossible. He had no such device. But, damn it, this whole thing was impossible. And horrifying because of its absurdity.

Even more horrifying, he noted when the round grey face bobbed only inches from his own, was the fact that he could see the tiny packet of notebook paper folded up in the neck of the balloon—a packet waiting for a hand to reach out, pop the enclosing membrane, and grasp it.

Sarcoxie was almost grateful that his hand couldn't do that. He was a dangling quadriplegic. Dawn was years away, and nightfall too far off for human reckoning. ●

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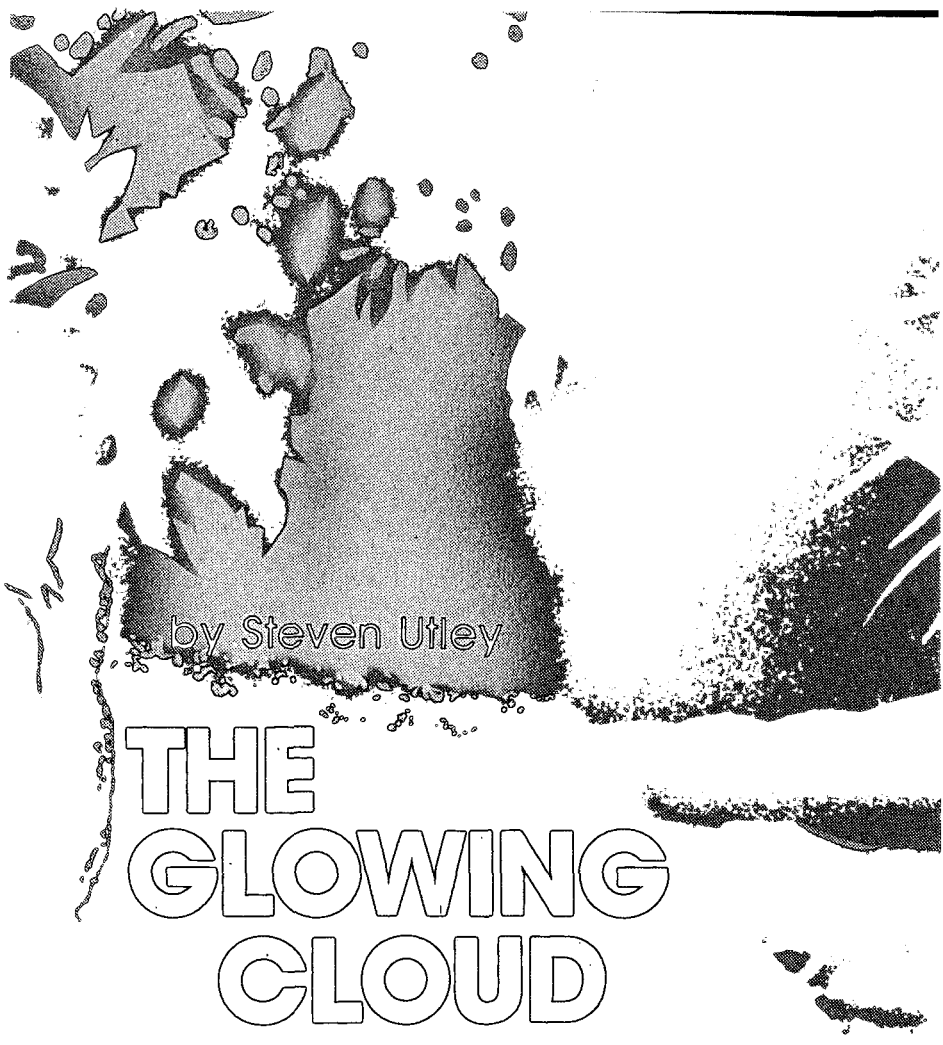

by Steven Utley

THE GLOWING CLOUD

The author firmly believes that even as we approach the ninetieth anniversary of the horrific events that underlie "The Glowing Cloud," the terrible nature of politics remains unchanged. This story was directly inspired by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts's book about St. Pierre, *The Day the World Ended*, which was published by Stein and Day in 1969.

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He could see no moon, no stars. The sky was black where it curved to meet the western horizon, and to the east it was roiling and opaque and glowed red about the summit of a burning mountain. He was descending to a landing at a point on the slope well below the crater but overlooking the narrow crescent of illumination that defined the town.

This part felt like a dream. He could feel the tingling, not-unpleasant burn of the drug behind his eyes and in his fingertips and teeth. His saliva tasted metallic. It's the drug, he told himself, a hallucination induced by the drug, but he had never quite convinced himself of this on any previous occasion, and couldn't now. He came down slowly, at a shallow angle. He could see not only what he reasonably would have expected to see from a great height at night, but also to a great depth. He saw, imagined, what nobody had ever seen: the planet in cross-section, with the green, unsubmerged peaks of the Windward and Leeward islands stretching across the Caribbean's blue, map-flat expanse from Puerto Rico to a Rand-McNally-colored South America complete with place names. There were latitude and longitude lines as well. Two of these intersected several kilometers west of his position, and in one corner of the intersection was a neat notation, *14°45', 61°15'*. East of the islands, the world had been sawn in half. Its mechanisms were exposed, rendered with textbook definition and shading from the blue-black of the outermost layer of atmosphere to the yellow-white of the nickel-iron core. The scale was skewed, emphasizing the massive conical bases of the Windwards, particularly that of the island to which he was being drawn. To the east of the archipelago, the edge of one plate of oceanic crust slipped under another. They ground and scraped and warmed, and masses of molten stuff the size of major planetoids burned their way up through the island's, so to speak, basement and went shooting out through the, so to speak, roof. The magma beneath the crust was done in incandescent yellow but darkened through streaky orange to a primary red as it made its way to the surface. He thought the view as impressive now as when he had first seen it, years before, in school, in a geo holo.

Adding to the dreaminess was a time-lapse effect. Medlin sank through a leafy canopy, disturbing it no more than a moonbeam, and alighted on firm ground. Trees cut off his view of the town. All he could see of the volcano now was a red-tinged dark sky. He could see it better, in fact, than he could see his own nimbused hand. Yet, even as he watched, the sky lightened, pinkish-brown cumulous masses of volcanic smoke raced across the sky, and shafts of sunlight speared down through gaps in the treetops. He was standing in the middle of an unpaved road in the heart of a tropical forest.

As he solidified, he became aware of other, less pleasant details.

The air was full of white specks that looked like snowflakes but stung like nettles when they hit bare skin. He took a breath, and the moisture in his mouth evaporated. A second breath made the lining of his throat

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sear and pucker. A paroxysm of coughing bent him double, and frightening thoughts filled his head.

Perhaps he had mistimed his arrival.

Perhaps he didn't have the better part of a week after all.

Perhaps he had arrived instead at the climactic moment.

But he did not shrivel, did not burst and stew in his own juices, did not become a charcoal mannequin. He lived, and felt as though he were coughing himself inside out, and reached with one auraed hand to steady himself against a huge tree garlanded with lianas and orchids. The bole was warm to his fingertips, almost hot. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his mouth and nose. That made breathing easier—a little easier.

Watery-eyed and puffy-lidded, he rested against the tree, and at almost the same moment, he realized two things: one, he was not alone; two, Ranke was not present.

The road was barely more than a trail of wheel ruts through the jungle. It branched above a fast, swollen creek, one fork veering to his left, the other plunging straight down the creek bank into water full of uprooted trees and other vegetation. Coming off the creek was a powerful smell of rotten eggs and dead animals. Strung in a ragged line beside it were two hundred men, women, and children. They were staring gloomily at the water. Medlin immediately knew them for what they were. He had seen their like thirty-six hours before, subjective time, in the Low Countries in 1940. As a consequence of the experience, he was convinced that it was impossible to mistake even small numbers of refugees for any other group one might encounter anywhere. These were, with a single exception, dark-skinned people. The men wore straw hats, loose trousers, and shirts. The women wore madras scarves, white blouses, long skirts. They carried little more than their infants.

The exception among them was a late-middle-aged white man dressed in a cassock. He was the only one wearing shoes. He started so violently when he noticed Medlin that Medlin thought the man must somehow have detected the luminous vapor that clung to him. His alarm did not entirely fade as the man strode forward with a belligerent expression on his face: even as reason asserted itself—the envelope of charged particles which Medlin saw as a nimbus about himself was as imperceptible as water vapor to denizens—he retreated two steps backward and thrust his hand into his coat pocket to feel the butt of the revolver there. The priest had enormous ropey hands and looked very fit for his age. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses was the fixed squint of someone who had spent a great many daylight hours hatless in the sun. He slightly knitted the muscles between his thick eyebrows, and the squint transformed into a scowl that told Medlin, here is a clergyman used to getting his way with the laity. The priest said, in snappish French, "Do not waste your time trying to persuade us to return! We are not going back!"

Behind him, several of the men put on scowls of their own. Medlin mustered all the sunny good nature he had in him at the moment and

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said, "I beg your pardon, Father. I have no intention of persuading you to go back. In fact, I have no idea what you are talking about."

The priest looked past him in obvious expectation of seeing others. Finding no one, he relaxed his expression somewhat.

"With that accent," he said, "you are a foreigner."

"I am an American traveler."

"Ah! An American!" The priest half-turned for a moment to give the refugees a reassuring smile and nod. The men's scowls yielded to the same disconsolate looks as before. "Americans are the only other people on this island who have shown any good sense so far! Accept my most sincere apologies. I am Father Hayot. When I saw you, I thought that the governor must have sent you after us."

"I myself have never met the governor." One played these things by ear.

Father Hayot's face wrinkled into a relief-map of righteous anger. Up close, he was even more formidable. He had eyes like musketballs. "My parishioners and I are from Le Prêcheur, a village to the north. Yesterday, while Governor Mouttet was safe in his residency in Fort-de-France, where the mountain cannot possibly harm him, *we* were fleeing for our lives. The lava destroyed everything, homes, crops—even the statue of the Virgin. Then, when we reached St. Pierre, the governor telegraphed the military commandant to confine us to the town hall compound, as though we were criminals! We would be there even now if I had not persuaded the guard to let us go."

Medlin thought it generally good policy to listen sympathetically to denizens, so he said, "But why would the governor have you confined?"

"He is too concerned with elections. He must feel a few poor refugees will cause a panic that will drive people from the polls!"

Well off to the right, the volcano made a sound like something clearing its throat. Medlin would not have imagined it possible for the villagers to look any unhappier than they did already. They surprised him.

"They believe the mountain is the chimney of a gigantic blacksmith shop—God's or the Devil's, they are unsure." Father Hayot's expression was both patronizing and exasperated. "I have been with them for many years now, and still, *still*, I cannot make them understand the vital difference between Christian faith and paganistic belief."

Medlin had never understood the difference himself, but did not say so. Instead, he asked, "Where does this trail lead?"

"Over the ridge to Morne Rouge if you follow it east. Straight to the coast road if you go west." Suspicion suddenly clouded the priest's face again. "Do you mean to say that you do not know where you are?"

Medlin put on a rueful smile. "I know that I am standing next to a live volcano. Obviously, I *am* lost. I am not even sure what day it is."

Dismayed but disarmed, the priest clucked reproachfully. "Today is Saturday."

Five days, Medlin thought, relieved. Five whole days and nights.

"If you have been lost out here on the mountainside," Father Hayot

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went on, "you are indeed most fortunate to be alive and unharmed. This is dangerous country even under normal conditions. Serpents. Wild pigs." He lowered his voice, and there was a fresh element of bitterness in it. "Sometimes I think there are no true Christians here in this countryside. People here may have a priest, may say prayers to the Virgin, but in their hearts they believe in magic and the world of ghosts. They listen to the *quimboiseurs*—the wizards, who kill whomever they meet and use human bones in their evil work. You must be very careful whom you meet in the jungle."

"I have a companion who seems to be lost, too. Perhaps you have seen him. He is a white man."

"We have passed few people at all since we left the coast road. Probably your lost companion has gone on to St. Pierre. But, were I you, I do not think I would follow him there. The situation has become very bad since just yesterday morning. No one knows what to do. Worse, no one seems to care. My parishioners want to return to their homes, whatever is left of them, but we are cut off by the torrent. The river is impassable all the way to the sea. I am trying to convince them to let me lead them inland. There is a convent at Morne Rouge where they can find shelter. You should come with us."

Medlin made himself look as though he were mulling over the suggestion. He actually was pondering his next move, but it involved finding Ranke and getting on with the business at hand, not running from volcanoes. Ranke's absence was nothing to get too alarmed about, yet. He could simply be late. Passengers sometimes got momentarily misplaced. Experienced travelers and passengers sometimes arrived not even approximately simultaneously. More disturbing than Ranke's missing a rendezvous by minutes or hours was the idea of his missing it by kilometers. He could have arrived on the opposite side of the island, or far out to sea. Damn all islands anyway. He could have come down close to the heart of the volcano's red glow. Not that it had to be anything melodramatic. He could have landed right on target, right on schedule, but clumsily, and broken his neck.

Medlin almost wished that, then admonished himself. Ought to have offered Ranke a hand to hold, he thought, and immediately recoiled from the idea. Holding hands was not essential, and it was no guarantee of anything, either. Some passengers found it reassuring. There was nothing travelers wanted more than calm passengers, but Christ-all-bleeding-mighty, *Ranke.* Not one to take anybody's hand, unless maybe to break a finger. His problem—Medlin's problem, now—was not that he needed reassurance or that he was even afraid of time-travel, but that he was no good at it.

Still, as long as he had stood close to Medlin, within the circle marked on the floor with strips of duct tape, he should have gone wherever Medlin went. Only he hadn't, and Medlin would eventually have to explain why not. It could go very badly indeed if the guy stayed lost. "Agent Ranke and I disliked each other," Medlin could hear himself explaining, "and

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it was unpleasant for us to stand close together, so perhaps he unconsciously pushed himself away at a crucial moment," and, "Perhaps," he could hear someone on the board of inquiry retorting, "unconsciously or otherwise, *you* may have pushed Agent Ranke away," and "Well," he could hear himself concluding lamely, "Agent Ranke was there one moment and not there the next."

Damn damn damn damn damn damn *damn*.

And then there was Garrick. At least the fugitive was near, or traces of her, anyway, scattered on the thick midday air, perceptible but ungraspable. Ranke was much, much better at this stuff. What for Ranke would have been a big neon arrow pointing directly toward Garrick was a film of cobwebs to Medlin.

It was enough to fill Medlin with a glum resolve. He said, "Thank you for your concern, Father, but I must locate my companion. We have important business in St. Pierre."

Father Hayot used his lips to make an soft, unpleasant, unpriestly sound, disgusted and dismissive. "Everyone," he growled, "has *important business* in that wicked place. Little Paris of the West Indies. Little Paris! A more appropriate name would be Little Sodom, or Little Gomorrah, especially if the lava should destroy it! Judgment is going to fall on those Pierrotins—a judgment of fire for their sinfulness and stupidity! The attitude among them is that my parishioners are foolish country people, and that Americans are cowards. Most of your countrymen have already sailed away."

"Still, I must go there."

"Then may God go with you, my son."

Father Hayot regarded him with unanticipated kindliness as he said that, and Medlin marveled at his own luck in being the one thing on Earth today, an American, for which this cantankerous priest evidently had positive feelings. He said, "Good luck to you as well, Father," and started walking away. The refugees hardly bothered looking at him as he passed.

"There is no luck," the priest called after him, "there is only God's mercy. And God's mercy is bigger than any mountain."

Medlin didn't look back, but gave a friendly wave, as though taking the priest's word for it. As soon as the villagers were out of sight around the bend in the road, he paused, shakily took a pint flask of distilled water from the left pocket of his coat, and drank half. First meetings with denizens always left him sweating and dry-mouthed.

He came eventually to the edge of the jungle. Beyond the trees was a field of cane stubble and, beyond that, other fields ranked in tiers extending all the way down to the sea, four or five kilometers away. In some of the fields were rippling stands of cane and little moving specks that were canecutters hard at their work. Off to the left lay the town, a quarter-moon by day as well as by night, its outline dictated by the natural amphitheater in which it lay. Medlin walked out from under the

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trees and went some distance before he thought to turn and take a look at the volcano.

He had to crane his head back to see it. Half-obscured by haze, the volcano's rocky collar was surely some distance away, and yet the steep green slope beneath the crater seemed to loom directly above him. It was as though a jungle had been stood on end and a great sooty smoky fire lighted at the higher end. No open sky was visible to the north; the smoke rolled away to infinity. The sight was hypnotic. He turned his back on it with no small effort of will and struck out along the margin of the cane stubble.

He headed south when he reached the coast road. To his right, the land sloped down into a calm sea. On his left, the road was edged with tropical trees. Set among them at intervals were stone crucifixes and shrines dedicated to the Virgin. On a slight rise near the northern point of the crescent, he paused for a first good look at his destination. While he surveyed the town, he took another drink from his flask, almost draining it, and ate his one nutrition bar, a dense, chewy foodstick a little larger than his thumb.

Between the crescent's horns, the waterfront stretched along a thin, scalloped beach of black sand. Crowded together along its entire length were wharves, warehouses, and, undoubtedly, establishments for the entertainment of sailors. A main thoroughfare ran the length of the crescent, about a mile. Numerous intersecting streets crept up from the waterfront to the base of the wooded slope behind the town, a distance of a quarter of a mile. There were one-storied buildings with tin awnings behind the quayside, and blocks of two-, even three-storied buildings. Most of the substantial-looking structures had walls of yellow stone and tiled roofs; the ash-coated tiles were faded pink. Here and there was something more impressive. Medlin saw a lighthouse, a twin-towered cathedral, and what appeared to be a fort or prison. But for the jungle and the volcano, he felt that he could have been looking at any small French Mediterranean seaport.

The town seemed peaceful to the point of stultification. Everyone in it could have been dead already, suffocated by ash. Then he saw distant figures unhurriedly moving about in the streets, comporting themselves as though there were not an active volcano in the world. At the water's edge, on a broad, sloping square dominated by the lighthouse, roustabouts worked like tiny ants. The roadstead was full of ships. The island shelved off at such a steep angle that even big ships were able to anchor close to shore.

On the outskirts of town, soldiers were dragging dead animals from a cart and flinging them into a pit beside the road. Mounds of freshly turned dirt lined both sides of the road; this activity had been going on for some time. Only the soldiers seemed remotely interested in their work, and that only to the point of quite clearly disliking it. Mass animal burials could have been the commonest sight on the island for all the attention paid by civilian passersby.

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Medlin entered the town behind a tall black woman who strode along purposefully with a wooden tray of fruits and vegetables balanced on her head. He estimated that she could not have been carrying much under sixty pounds. Watching the play of muscles in her dusky calves made him feel flabby. Trotting along sometimes in front and sometimes beside or behind the woman was a miniature edition of her, with a miniature edition of her burden.

The streets were filled with black, brown, and yellow people, with a sprinkling of white. The falling ash muffled every sound, and voices blended together into a soft background burble. The predominant speech was, to Medlin's ear, like French come through Africa.

It quickly became obvious to him that the situation was not only as bad as Father Hayot had said, but becoming steadily worse. Groups of people stood about who seemed to have no place to go, no idea of what to do. These, too, had that unmistakable look of refugees; the authorities must have stopped confining them, but had not decided as yet what else to do with them. Livestock wandered loose. They seemed to be dropping dead faster than the soldiers could haul away the carcasses. Asphyxiated birds lay everywhere. The fountains were fouled with black mud.

Yet commerce was gamely trying to flourish. Ash bedraggled flowers in the vendors' stalls and made foodstuffs look grayish and unappetizing. The variety was more impressive than either the quality or the quantities—there were bananas, oranges, pineapples, tomatoes, breadfruit, sapodillas. Apart from the vendors' manifest irritation at continually having to brush grit from their wares, few people evidenced much concern about the volcano. Many did not even seem interested. Everyone joked and haggled, harangued and gossiped.

He rested on a stone bench under the mango and tamarind trees edging the lighthouse square. Shipping brokers, all of them Caucasian, stood about conversing among themselves while black and brown roustabouts manhandled casks and hogsheads onto lighter barges and yelled to one another in their mutant-French creole. Unmindful of hazards, children chased one another among the barrels. The scene was surreal: sweating workers, tropical trees, blistering pseudo-snowflakes swirling in the air. The concentration of rum, sugar, fruit-tree, and waterfront aromas almost masked the stench of sulphur.

Garrick, too, was on the heavy air. She fluctuated between the almost-there and the almost-not-there. Now she was just beyond touch, just out of sight and hearing, and now she was across the world, on the moon, passing the orbit of Neptune. She was an object removed from its proper matrix, like Medlin, anomalous, leaving, wherever she went, a trail of disturbance like gossamer, like insects' breathing, like prickles of sensation in a long-amputated limb. Medlin could sense the achronicity but could not follow the trail. *His* forte was exploiting weak spots in time. Garrick was an itch he could not locate.

He was very hungry as well. His empty stomach seemed to be devouring itself. He sucked the last few drops of distilled water from his

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canteen and patted the pockets of his coat in the silly hope that he had somehow overlooked a second foodstick until now. There were only the revolver and fake identity papers. If currency had been issued, Ranke had it. Probably it had not been issued at all. No one had thought or, rather, Thomas, the agency chief, had not figured, that Medlin would have to stay long enough to need money. Thomas' credo was "Get in, get it done, get out."

He fantasized about using the revolver to hold up women carrying trays of fruits and vegetables on their heads, then reminded himself he had gone without food or water for two days in Trincomalee that time. Ranke will show up any second now, he thought. We'll grab Garrick and get the hell out of here before sundown.

He waited. The longshoremen went on loading cargo onto lighters, and the children kept playing among the barrels and hogsheads. A cool breeze blew across the square, bringing some relief from heat and bad smells. No one paid any attention to Medlin. He was just a lover of magnificent sunsets, or a drunk. By sundown, the shipping brokers and the laborers and most of the children had gone. The sky stayed red over the volcano, and the streets neither cleared nor quietened. The day's commerce was simply replaced by the evening's.

Medlin ground his fist into his palm and stood up. He did not want to move, but the last place he wanted to stay, besides *here* in general, was *here* in particular, on the waterfront at night on a Saturday. No burning mountain or ashfall was going to discourage people in a place like this from getting themselves roughed up, possibly robbed, possibly rubbed out.

He took a step away from the bench and started to fall. The ground was not where his foot expected it. He went down hard on one knee and thought for a second that he had stepped into an unseen hole. But the ground itself was moving. The bench collapsed behind him—it was a simple stone slab set on uprights—and from the direction of the landing came a sound like the grinding of millstones. He heard a child's shrill, brief scream.

Casks and hogsheads were rolling down the slope and piling up at the water's edge. In the dim light, two or three children ran past him, flat-out, in terror. Their short, harsh breaths were like sobs.

He saw what had happened: a toppling barrel had crushed a small boy. The child was so skinny, so shabbily dressed, that he looked like a small pile of sticks and rags on the paving stones. Amazingly, he hadn't been instantly killed—Medlin, as he started to kneel, heard a wheeze and a bubbling exhalation above the slosh of waves and the human commotion all along the waterfront. He thought better of kneeling and looked around anxiously. It was against regulations to call undue attention to oneself or to become involved with denizens any more than was essential to the completion of a mission. During the past week, subjective time, he had seen enough in Belgium to think himself inured to the sight of

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the dead. He knew that everyone in this town was going to die. But no one had told him there would be mashed children beforehand.

Human figures were running back and forth on the square above the jumble at the water's edge. Voices filled the night. He heard shrieks of fright, shrieks of laughter, as if, he thought, suddenly enraged, everybody in town were saying, To think that such a little shake really frightened us! A uniformed white man ran toward him. Medlin could not tell by the flickering light of the man's torch whether he was a policeman or a military officer, but then he turned and bawled out an order, and five or six colonial soldiers appeared. One of them carried a stretcher fashioned from poles and canvas sacking.

"Quickly, quickly," the officer gasped. The injured boy wheezed and exhaled wetly. He did not inhale again. The officer pushed aside the soldier with the stretcher and knelt, checked for a pulse, rose shaking his head. He told two of his men to take the body away and the rest to search for other possible victims in the wreckage at the water's edge. The soldiers scattered across the landing.

"It is really too bad," the officer said to Medlin, "but these little black wharf children are as thick as rats. I wonder that more of them are not hurt or killed every day." He had a roman nose of fabulous dimension. Its shadow hid his mouth as he spoke. "Did you see the accident, Monsieur?"

"No. I only heard a scream."

"You are—"

"An American."

"You are from the embassy, or one of the ships in the harbor?"

Medlin said, "Yes," as though he were actually answering the question.

"Then I must advise you to return. That tremor has caused more than the death of this child tonight."

"Just one damned thing after another."

"Quite so, Monsieur. It is terrible." The officer touched the bill of his cap with a forefinger and went to rejoin his men.

Medlin turned and lost himself in the crowd. He let it carry him where it would. Some portion of it carried him straight onto a street filled with raucousness and ripe smells. There were many sailors. They walked in small groups in the middle of the street—there was no horse or wheel traffic here, and the sidewalks, barely wide enough to deserve that name, had accordingly been reserved as seating or standing space for those too google-eyed to walk. Every doorway on both sides of the street was an illumined hole that spewed human noises, inarticulate cries and shouts, eruptions of laughter and singing, and a continuous rumbling thunder of conversation. Moving remoralike in the wake or on the flank of this or that group of men, trying to look as though he belonged, Medlin heard snatches of French, the local creole, English, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, other languages he could not begin to identify. On second-floor balconies above the doorways more or less dark-skinned women stood leaning on iron railings or sat on cane chairs. A few gazed down upon the promenade with grave humor in their expressions. One woman

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gave Medlin an especially unnerving look, not of cool, professional invitation but of contemptuous expectation, not daring him to come up to see her sometime but merely holding him to the low standard of male behavior of her experience. She gripped the railing as if she could tear it apart with her hands. Her expression became doubly contemptuous when she realized that he was not going to oblige her. It gave him the creeps. Then she shifted her attention to someone else in the street. It struck Medlin first that her presentation could not net her very many customers, and next that she might only be waiting for one more. She was a knife waiting to fly out of its sheath at somebody.

Most of the women were exuberant and lascivious. They called down to the sailors, issued impossible ribald challenges, and the least-inhibited among them pantomimed fellatio or parted their robes to expose their breasts. There were breasts of every size, shape, and shade. The sailors roared approval and roared answers to the challenges and trooped indoors, roaring still, to run gauntlets of dedicated capitalists that stretched from bar to bed.

Not all propositions were made from balconies. Medlin suddenly found his path blocked by an ancient, gnomish woman whose head barely came to his breastbone. She had a face as rough as a coconut and a grip like a blacksmith's. With her bony hand tight on his elbow, she began tugging him in the direction of one of the buildings. As she tugged, she spoke to him so fast that he did not think he caught as much as one word in three.

Still, her meaning was clear. He saw now that he was being drawn toward not a doorway but the narrow alley between two buildings. Just around the corner, the woman seemed to be saying, and up the stairs, I have the most beautiful young girl for you. Medlin planted his feet on the cobblestones and tried to jerk his elbow free. The woman weighed nothing. He lifted her off the ground when he moved his arm, but he could not shake her loose. Even as he swung her around she continued to babble at him. A girl for you, Monsieur, just this way, come, see, you will like her very much. He felt a little stir of panic, cursed aloud, and broke away with a blow to the woman's wrist. She gave a cry and skipped away shaking her hand in the air as though it had caught fire. She did no more, however, than glare at him for a few seconds while she rubbed her wrist; then she was looking around for the next customer.

Next victim is more like it, Medlin thought as he moved on. No light fell in the alley toward which she had pulled him. It was a perfect place to get one's skull bashed in.

The crowd on what he was starting to think of as the Rue Syphilis sometimes flowed smoothly and swiftly, sometimes lurched along as though pulled by the ambulatory drunks in its ranks. It expanded and contracted, broke apart, reformed, spun off men through the beckoning doorways, drew them out when they had been depleted. Then, abruptly, the saloons and brothels were behind him, and, no less abruptly, the character of the crowd changed. The sailors and other commerce-minded

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individuals blew away like chaff. In their place were disoriented-looking townspeople.

Medlin's knee hurt. He found a place where he could sit, rest, watch, and not get tripped over by people as they ran about. After a while, he realized that many of them seemed to be moving with a purpose now. Thinking that perhaps they knew something he didn't, he went with them. They quietened as they moved farther from the waterfront. With their footfalls muffled by ash, they walked, Medlin among them, like phantoms through the chaos of winding, unlevel streets, until they reached the gate of a cemetery. Beyond the graveyard was the twin-towered cathedral he had noticed that afternoon, and, surrounding this, a great, dense, milling mob of men, women, and children. They were very quiet—extraordinarily, eerily quiet, he thought. Uniformed men, again, either policeman or soldiers, tried to clear the area. Probably they had been at it for some time, but the crowd ignored them. Abruptly, the uniformed men gave up on persuasion and began to shove. The crowd answered with a surly collective complaint as it was prodded and pushed. For all of the commotion, nobody seemed to go anywhere. The crowd resisted efforts to get it to move through the expedient of pretending to move, withdrawing at right angles to the direction of any concerted drive made by its would-be herders, closing in behind them. Medlin had seen—only on the real-time news, of course—crowds and crowd-managers lose patience with each other, and he thought, Just what I *need,* to get caught in a riot. But there was no riot. Some faces were petulant. That was all. No one seemed angry or even frightened, and this, Medlin reflected, amazed, with the big spark-spitter itself just to the north, looking very much indeed like God's chimney or the Devil's whirlpool bath. Perhaps the big statue of the Virgin that stood before the cathedral was exerting its pacifistic effect on everyone.

Whatever she was doing and however good she was, he did not believe that she could keep it up indefinitely. He had a sudden sense of tectonic activity kilometers below. He could feel it through the soles of his shoes. Again he saw, or imagined, cold, heavy Atlantic Ocean bottom being subducted by Caribbean Sea bottom, becoming less cold, less heavy, rising under pressure and full of gas through weak spots in overlying rock, up into the back of the island's throat. Some bubble broke there, like a god's belch. Shutters rattled nearby. An invisible hand gave him a shove. He waited for something more, and all around him the people stirred, nervous as antelope. He began to walk, with a deliberation dictated by his knee. He found an arched doorway where he would not get caught in a stampede if there was going to be one. He sagged against the wall and waited.

Some minutes later, as he catalogued his personal miseries, a thick, black cloud settled. It got everyone's attention immediately, like an eyeful of pepper. Blinded and choking, Medlin staggered and collided with a wall. People blundered by, tripping, screaming. Animals bleated their anguish. Somebody stepped all over him. He tried to get out of the way,

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was engulfed in bodies, found himself barely able to breathe or keep his feet on the ground. The mob came to a shuddering, uncoordinated halt as it piled around him. The doorway was a *cul-de-sac*. The human mass encasing Medlin collapsed onto itself as first somebody went down and then everybody else fell. Medlin kicked free of arms and legs, found himself trapped in a corner. He curled into a ball, screwed his eyes tightly shut, and pressed his handkerchief hard against his face. The fumes still reached him. *I'm going to die here.*

But he didn't die there. Ten minutes later, or an hour—he couldn't guess how long—he heard bells toll midnight and looked up with smarting eyes. The terrible cloud was dissipating. He made out indistinct moving figures, then, blurrily, the walls of the surrounding buildings. By the time his vision cleared, the mob had evaporated like the cloud, leaving the ground covered with debris. Not far from him lay a woman. Everything about her was gray with ash, her skin and clothing, her open eyes.

Coughing and aching, he left her there.

He was resting on a wooden bench set under a tin awning when the volcano showed that it was not finished for the night. There was a brilliant flash; a split-second later, the sound of a tremendous explosion. Purple lightning strobes defined a vast, airborne pile of soot above the summit, and made the world glow a lurid magenta. Out of the cloud spun and tumbled bits of junk like cut-rate meteors, with masses of sparks at their heads and streamers of smoke out behind. These pyrotechnics were accompanied by a rising, falling, unending roar.

From somewhere behind him came the sound of laughter.

The streets were filling with people again. Still more people were pushing back the shutters from upstairs bedroom windows and leaning out to watch the fireworks. They pointed and waved torches and whooped and oohed.

First *Garrick* goes crazy, Medlin thought, now everyone in the French West Indies. . . .

There was a pattering like hail on the awning. Someone in the street let out a howl of surprise and pain. The howl became a chorus, and the crowd vanished. Bedroom shutters slammed closed.

The precipitate was pumice. Most of the particles were very small, no bigger than grains of sand, but there were fragments as big as golf balls in the gritty drizzle. They bounced and smoked on the pavement and clacked deafeningly on the tin awning.

The street was empty when the fall let up about a quarter of an hour later. The town seemed to have lost consciousness. Medlin found more substantial shelter, in another arched doorway, and crouched there feeling sorry for himself, wondering what the hell else he was supposed to do, and waiting for daylight. He would have prayed for it had he known how.

He dozed off in a squatting position. When he awoke, his bruised knee was stiff and throbbing. As he hauled himself up, two men strolled by in

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the street. They looked like any other two Pierrotins he had seen till now, save for the faint, luminous vapor that clung to them.

Nothing had been said to him about other travelers.

It was useless hiding—the two men noticed Medlin's nimbus at once; in the shadows beneath the doorway, he must have looked equally spook-like to them—so he gave them a sheepish grin and said, in English, "Feet've gone to sleep," and felt like a complete idiot.

They conferred, standing side by side and not taking their eyes off him, one of them bending slightly at the waist to speak quietly to his companion. The man on the right was small, flat-faced, with a stub nose and no lips. Whatever half-thought-out request for assistance Medlin had in mind, he stifled. Beyond the fact that *it wasn't done,* he was too taken aback by the flat-faced man's expression of annoyance to ask for help. The flat-faced man shook his head in answer to something his companion said, and they both turned and walked away, deliberately, without haste.

Nothing ventured, Medlin told himself, and called out, "Wait!"

The other man glanced back over his shoulder and gave him a half-apologetic look, a helpless shrug, but kept walking. Soon, even the strangers' fox-fire was lost to sight.

Swell, Medlin thought, as if my plate wasn't full enough, there're strangers in town, and they're stuck-up! He had no idea who they were, where they came from; just one more goddamn thing wrong. He had been unhappy about this mission to begin with. Now he hated it. If it had been up to him, he would have let go then and there and gone home. He cursed Thomas for sending him. He cursed Ranke for being no good at traveling and making it necessary that Thomas send Medlin. He cursed Garrick for making trouble for everybody.

He must have dozed again against the wall. The next thing he knew, it was dawn, Sunday morning, someone was pulling at his sleeve. He could hear church bells ringing and, closer, a child's voice saying, "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

He looked down and saw a boy standing next to him. The boy was dressed in shorts and a baggy shirt. By the light of the filmy sunrise, he looked to be about twelve years old and could have been the twin of the boy Medlin had seen lying mangled on the waterfront. Had that really been only last night?

"You are Monsieur Medlin?"

He was too stunned to answer.

"The lady wishes you to have this," and the boy handed him a folded newspaper.

Medlin took it, asked, "What lady? Who gave you this?"

"A white lady."

"Where did you talk to her?"

The boy looked over his shoulder, toward the entrance to the square. "Just there, on the Avenue Victor Hugo."

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"Show me!" Medlin stuffed the newspaper into his pocket and urged the boy to run.

The Avenue Victor Hugo was the main thoroughfare. Though the sun had yet to peek over the highland behind the town, the street was packed. People rose early enough in the tropics anyway, Medlin knew, but the people he saw now looked as though they were up late rather than early. They looked the way he felt, unrested and dirty. No one in the town could have slept much with all the fireworks. There were numerous white faces among the darker ones, none of them the right face. But Garrick did waft on the dirty air. He tried to hold on to her. It was like trying to grab a small wind-borne scrap of paper.

"Crazy woman," he muttered, "crazy goddamn old woman!"

He whipped out the newspaper and opened it furiously. It was a broadsheet called *Les Colonies,* dated Samedi 3 May 1902. A banner proclaimed this to be an extraordinary edition. There were no photographs or other illustrations.

Written in dark pencil in the upper righthand corner, above the logo, was, *See Mme Boislaville—G.*

The boy was still at his side. Medlin said, "Do you know where I can find a Madame Boislaville?"

The boy nodded happily and said, "She is my aunt," and set off at a trot down the Avenue Victor Hugo. Medlin called him back and said that he had hurt his leg and could only hobble. The boy led him at a more considerate pace onto a side street. Medlin found himself surrounded by food shops and cafes. Only a few shopkeepers had taken down their shutters today, and they were being overwhelmed by impatient-looking customers. The babble here had a hard, argumentative edge to it.

Halfway down the street, the boy stopped before a yellow two-storied building with blue trim. Its shutters were closed. The boy pounded on the door with his small brown fist.

The voice within was a woman's. Medlin didn't have to understand the words to get the meaning: Go away! The boy pleaded. There was silence from behind the door for a moment, then the sound of a bolt being drawn. The door opened wide enough for one eye to peer out.

Remembering his manners, Medlin said, "Madame Boislaville, I presume," and gave her the merest suggestion of a bow.

The space between door and jamb widened. Madame Boislaville was tall, limber-looking, mocha-colored, of indeterminate age. She could have been twenty-five or forty. She said, "You are the friend of Madame Garrick?"

"Yes. My name is Medlin. Your nephew here—"

She looked down at the boy sharply. He was almost squirming. He said, in French rather than creole, so that Medlin would understand, "Madame Garrick promised that I would be paid to bring this gentleman here."

"And Madame Garrick," the woman retorted, also in French, "undoubtedly paid you herself, Symphar. You wicked boy, go home to your poor

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mother. She must have work for you to do. Or perhaps she will just give you a good beating. Go!"

Foiled, wicked Symphar ran away.

"Come inside quickly, Monsieur." Madame waved him in with urgent gestures and slammed the bolt behind her with obvious relief. It took Medlin's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the gloom, and then he saw that he was in a cramped and dimly lit cafe. Garrick had been here. As palpable as shadow, her trace enveloped him. She had been here *recently,* had lingered here, had touched or been touched by Madame's hands, had . . . had what? He looked around, not quite hopeful or expectant, not quite fearful, not quite knowing how he might feel if he were to see her. Chairs sat legs-up on tables. The only person in the room besides Madame and himself was a mulatto girl who stood by a curtained doorway that separated the serving area from the rear of the building. She looked about as old as the boy. She was eyeing him watchfully. Then a stooped, ancient woman holding a ratty broom appeared behind her and made to put an arm around her—protectively, he thought, until the child evaded the embrace and darted behind the bar. The woman muttered harshly and glared at Medlin as though something were all his fault. She began scratching in a corner with her broom.

Madame had cleared off a table and invited him to sit. He could not help sighing as he did so.

She said, "Are you hungry, thirsty? Would you care to rest?"

"I am very thirsty."

"I have just the thing for it." She turned and clapped her hands and called out a name, Elizabeth. The girl popped up behind the bar, listened to brief instructions, disappeared again. There was a clink of glass, and she emerged around the end of the bar carrying a small filled tray. She kept Madame between Medlin and herself as she set the tray on the table. She was as wary as a half-feral cat, ready to bolt at the first hint of danger from any direction. Her gaze was steady and expressionless, and he could tell from the way she held her head that she was listening with one ear for the old woman. He could only guess the nature of that disagreement. It occurred to him that because he was white, male, and a grown-up, she probably believed him capable of anything. He gave her what he intended as a friendly smile. She responded by scurrying away into some back room.

Madame filled a glass with clear liquid, added syrup from a little pitcher and a bit of lime peel, and gave the mixture a quick stir. She set the glass before him with an air of supreme confidence in the efficacy of its contents. He took a cautious sip. It was basically rum, and went down pleasantly. He took a second sip. It went down very pleasantly indeed, washing away the taste of sulphur, soothing his throat.

Go easy on this stuff, he warned himself. His tolerance for alcohol was low. He made a heartfelt sound of delight and gratitude for his hostess.

She looked pleased by it and said, "Your friend has arranged for your food and lodging here. She paid me for a week in advance, paid for

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everything. Now sit and rest. I will have a hot bath prepared for you while you eat," and with that she turned and spoke in rapid-fire creole first to the girl and then to the old woman. The girl nodded obediently and disappeared.

The old woman shook her head and went on fussing in the corner. When Madame spoke to her again, with somewhat of an edge in her voice, the old woman turned and made a short reply. They began to argue as though they had been at it for years and could take up their dispute wherever they had left off last time. His eyes had adjusted to the light in the place, and he thought that he detected a slight but certain resemblance between the women. The older one could have been the younger one's mother or grandmother. Whatever their argument was really about, he realized all at once that he had become part of it, for the old woman was gesturing at him with her broom as she screamed at Madame. Madame pointed in his direction as well, and then enumerated unguessable points on her long fingers. He found being argued about in a language he couldn't understand more than a little scary.

At length, the old woman was in such a fury that she left words behind. She gargled a cry, dropped the broom, raked the air over her head with two bird-claw hands, and stormed into the back. A moment later, the girl came out in a hurry, carrying another tray.

Medlin said, "I am sorry, I have come at a bad time," and reluctantly started to get up.

Madame held up her hand. He settled hopefully back into the chair.

"Do not trouble yourself about that old woman," she said. "She is a superstitious country woman, very ignorant. She thinks *all* whites have the evil eye." The way she said it suggested to him that she herself thought *some* whites might have the evil eye. "She came here when the mountain began to erupt. She thinks whites are to blame."

The girl had placed the second tray on the table. From it, Madame set warm bread and a bowl of steaming gumbo before him. He put his faith in inoculations and tasted the gumbo. It was delicious. He said so at once.

Madame smiled for the first time. She had a big, pleasant smile. Medlin found himself thinking that much of the best of African, European, Asian, and Amerindian faces had collected in her features.

"There is not much food here now," she said. "This ash, *aiee,* it ruins everything! We did not open for business today because we have nothing to serve—only enough for ourselves and you. I did not believe Madame Garrick. She said there would be shortages because of the mountain."

She seemed about to leave him to eat in peace. He said, "An extraordinary person, my friend. When did you see her last?"

"It was two mornings ago, Friday, just after the mountain began to erupt."

"Did she say where I may find her?"

"She said that she would call for you here."

"Anything else?"

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"She asked if I have relatives living elsewhere on the island. I told her that everyone on Martinique is related, except for the freshest arrival from France. Even then, I told her, they say it is only a matter of time."

Medlin laughed along with her. "What did she say to that?"

"Oh, she laughed, Monsieur, she laughed the most wonderful laugh."

She smiled at the memory of that, and Medlin thought, Garrick, you old charmer. Then Madame became serious.

"But then," she said, "she told me that if I have relatives in the south, I should give some thought to visiting them. She told me that the mountain is going to destroy the town.

"Do you believe her?"

"I do not know. The mountain has not erupted since anyone can remember. It made some harmless puffs of smoke many years ago, when my grandmothers were young girls. But I do not know what to believe now. If you will excuse me, Monsieur," and she moved away with a rustle of skirts.

When he had finished eating, she reappeared and led him to a small, steam-filled room built onto the back of the house. Covered storage jars and other earthenware were ranked against the walls. There was a small hearth for heating water in one corner. The girl was pouring water from a large pan into a metal bathtub that sat in the middle of the floor.

"Here are towels and a sponge and some soap," Madame said, indicating each thing with a palm-up wave as she named it, "and here is a robe. If you will leave your garments outside the door, I shall clean them. It is a sin to work on Sunday, but you must have clean clothes." She paused and stepped out of the way to let the girl pass with her empty kettle. "Do you require anything else, Monsieur?

Medlin looked at her, was about to say no, said nothing. She was standing at the door, watching him, the fingertips of her right hand resting lightly against her sternum above the slope of her bosom. It was not a provocative stance, and yet he thought he saw something in it that was not a welcome and not a challenge, but only a look of expectation. Men always required something else. He could not help thinking of the whore on the Rue Syphilis, and it shocked him.

"No," he managed to say, "nothing else," and waited too long before adding, "a good long quiet soak is all I need, thank you," and felt like a complete idiot for the second time since he had arrived in town, "thank you very much."

"You are welcome, Monsieur."

Medlin stared at the door after she had closed it behind herself. Had he read those signals right? Had she been offering to let him—? Christ, no, surely not. If *washing clothes* on Sunday was a sin, what did that make—?

No, surely not, surely not.

A cheap cloth curtain covered the single window. He drew it aside and looked out onto an unpaved courtyard with a small fountain. There was a vegetable garden in one corner of the yard, and what he took to be a

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cooking shed against the near wall. Some dead birds lay on the ground opposite. Everything looked dingy. Flecks of ash still turned in the air.

He let the curtain drop, and his fingers came away dirty. Ash seeping in through the space between window frame and curtain had collected moisture from the humid air in the room and settled on everything in a gritty paste.

Medlin peeled himself to the skin. First taking care to empty the pockets of his coat, he neatly folded his outer garments, rolled his shirt and underwear into a bundle, and set them outside the door along with his tired-looking shoes. Then he eased himself into the tub. He had always believed that bathing was the benchmark of civilization. But for the thin scum of ash collecting on the surface of his bath water and the sediments of fine volcanic matter on the bottom of the tub, this could have been the best bath he had ever taken. Excepting that time when he and—what *was* her name? His thoughts abruptly veered back to the vision of Madame Boislaville standing at the door, waiting for him to say it, if she had in fact been waiting for him to say something.

You're imagining stuff, he told himself. One glimpse of the nightlife in Little Sodom, Little Gomorrah, and you think every woman in town's for rent.

But, he asked himself, *did* Garrick pay her to do *that,* too?

What the hell, Med, Garrick's *crazy.* She really *is* crazy, really *has* to be crazy to be doing what she's doing, really is capable of anything, but this Boislaville woman's a *denizen* for chrissake, be like screwing a ghost for chrissake, be like, and he forced the Madames Garrick and Boislaville from his mind for the moment and let the water claim him.

When he began to doze, he got out of the tub, dried off, and put on the robe. It was clean but worn. It felt tight across his shoulders. His hostess evidently heard him thumping around, for now came a discreet knock at the door, and she said, "Monsieur enjoyed his bath?"

He peered around the edge of the door at her and could not read her expression. There was in her voice no note of anything except professional solicitude. He began to feel ashamed of himself, and it confused him. She was only a denizen.

"It was the most pleasant bath I have ever taken," he told her.

She gave a slight nod and led him upstairs to a small room with a cot, a table, and a chair. On the table was a metal washbasin containing a pitcher and a block of soap the size of a half-brick. There was a porcelain chamber pot beneath the cot. The door had no lock. She nodded at both shuttered windows.

"More dust gets in with the shutters closed than light gets in with the shutters opened."

Small wonder, Medlin thought. There was no glass in the windows, an ideal arrangement for the tropics unless there happened to be a nearby volcano pumping out schmutz.

The woman made a furrow in the thin layer of ash on the tabletop and showed him her gray fingertip. "It is impossible to keep house. I had the

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girl clean here just this morning. I shall bring your clothes as soon as they are clean."

"Thank you."

The room was an oven. As soon as Madame left, he opened the shutters of both windows in the, as it turned out, vain hope of getting some air to blow through. The windows faced north and west, and from them he could look out on the street in front of the Boislaville establishment and also see the volcano and roadstead. The volcano seemed to doze fitfully. The sea looked lead-gray and sluggish.

Garrick, he thought, Garrick, what *are* you up to?

Garrick had never been one to do anything just for the sake of doing it.

Medlin sat on the sill and unfolded the newspaper again. By the poor light of the ash-veiled day he began to read, impatiently at first, then more intently and with deepening disbelief.

> Yesterday the people of St. Pierre were treated to a grandiose spectable in the majesty of the smoking volcano. While at St. Pierre the admirers of the beautiful could not take their eyes from the smoke of the volcano and the ensuing falls of cinder, timid people were committing their souls to God.
>
> It would seem that many signs ought really to have warned us that Mount Pelée was in a state of serious eruption. There have been slight earthquake shocks this noon. The rivers are in overflow. The need now is for the people outside St. Pierre to seek the shelter of the town. Citizens of St. Pierre! It is your duty to give these people succor and comfort.
>
> Because of the situation in the hinterland, the excursion to Mount Pelée which had been organized for tomorrow morning will not leave St. Pierre, the crater being absolutely inaccessible. Those who were to have joined the party will be notified when it will be found practical to carry out the original plan.

There was a burst of complaint from the street below. He looked down to see a fistfight in front of a shop two doors away. No one moved to stop it. An aproned man with an alarmed expression stood to one side, making pushing gestures with his hands and volubly exhorting everyone to go away. The bystanders ignored him. Most of them watched the fight. Perhaps half a dozen separated from the crowd and coalesced into a discrete group that moved with stunning suddenness into a vegetable shop across the street. Medlin saw no signals exchanged, no indication that the people knew one another; looting was an idea whose moment

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had come. There were shouts and crashes. The group emerged and turned into its constituent strangers, who ran away clutching handfuls of vegetables as though they were trophies.

The idea caught on. Other shops were raided. Some raiders began to tear shutters off the closed shops. Medlin noticed a couple of men look speculatively at him and at Madame Boislaville's closed shutters. One of the men took a step forward, and Medlin slipped a hand into the pocket of the robe, wrapped his fingers around the butt of the revolver, wondered if he could actually bring himself to use it on anyone except Garrick.

Another thought intruded on that one: could he do even that?

Now a squad of soldiers appeared. It was met by distraught shopkeepers, who jabbered in creole and French and pointed accusingly at individual onlookers. One of the accused, a burly mulatto, answered by raising a yam to his mouth, biting into it defiantly, and chewing with exaggerated gusto. The lieutenant was distracted by shopkeepers' hands on his lapels. The enlisted men behind him clutched their rifles, looking uneasy.

Medlin started to close the shutter, then stared. From the volcano an enormous black cloud was spreading across the sky. He watched, alarmed, as stuff began to rain from the cloud's underside. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed an object flashing downward at terrific speed. An instant later—before he could turn his head—the object struck the eaves of a nearby roof, shattering tiles and spraying the street with ceramic shrapnel. Below his window, accusations broke off in yelps and screeches. He slammed the shutter and rushed to close the other. He listened unhappily for a time, sitting on the cot, yawning in spite of himself. Finally, he stretched out and fell asleep so fast that it was like blacking out. The last thing he heard was the sound of church bells punctuating the clatter of falling pumice.

Heat and the rotten-egg smell woke him. He limped dazedly to the window and cracked the shutter. It was just as hot and smelled just as bad outside, but the view was impressive. Sunset made the vast poisonous cloud hanging over the volcano a thing of beauty. He started to return to the cot when he saw his coat hanging on a peg set into the wall. His trousers and shirt hung over the back of the chair, and there was a bundle on the table that had to be his underwear. His shoes were by the door; they still looked tired. Medlin removed the trousers and shirt, dragged the chair over to the door, and wedged the back under the handle.

He slept poorly and rose early. Madame had arisen even earlier and came tapping at the door as he was washing his face. She apologized profusely and repetitiously for the breakfast she brought. The ash was in everything, she said. The bread was stale, the fruit was speckled. There was no cream for the coffee, which tasted of sulphur anyway.

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He thanked her all the same. He ate and drank and then resignedly opened the shutters to meet the new day. This Monday morning, the volcano had crowned itself with wisps of dirty white smoke. Most people in the street had handkerchiefs tied over their lower faces. It reminded him irresistibly of Tokyo and Mexico City.

The old woman was almost directly below his window, stirring up ash on the sidewalk with her remnant of a broom. She was absorbed in her work until a carriage drew up at the curb; Medlin caught some infinitesimal, unseeable, untouchable, but undeniable portion of Garrick's being. A glimmering arm appeared at the window of the cab and rested on the sill. The shimmering hand beckoned. Oblivious to the glow but radiating her own suspicion, the woman shuffled over to the carriage. Words were spoken, and she suddenly turned to look up at him. There was no mistaking the hatred in her expression. She nodded to the person in the cab and disappeared through the door below.

Medlin shook the ash out of his coat and shoes and rushed downstairs, catching the old woman as she was still sullenly conveying her message to Madame.

"Please excuse my hurry," he said as he dashed past, "but I must go!"

The carriage was covered with ash. Both the driver and the horse were red-eyed and miserable. The cab door was flung open invitingly, and it did not surprise Medlin, as he stepped up to climb in, to see Garrick waiting for him. Still, he paused, and hung half in and half out while his face grew hot and the muscles in his forehead contracted into a frown. Garrick was dressed in white and had a stylish hat on her head. She was so old and faded that, but for the pale blue band of her hat and the glimmer around her, she would have been achromatic. One hand, as gnarled as mangrove roots, curled around the handle of a wooden walking stick. Her other hand was drawn into a knobby fist like the head of a shillelagh. Poking from the fist was a small revolver. The muzzle was negligently trained on Medlin's midriff.

Garrick grinned, and skin around her eyes crinkled like parchment. The rest of her face was smooth and taut. Her skin looked shrink-wrapped over the pointed chin and nose and the high, sharp cheekbones. She said, "It's good to see you, Med. How was World War Two?"

"Garrick," Medlin said tonelessly, eyeing the revolver, and then after a second added, "is a gun necessary?"

"It depends. How sure are you of your own loyalties?"

"At the moment . . . "

"Just to be on the safe side, why don't I trouble you for the gun you're carrying? Lean in just a bit." Garrick let go of the walking stick, slipped her hand into the pocket of Medlin's coat, withdrew his revolver by the

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barrel, gingerly, as though it were a dead mouse. "Why do men always have to have such big guns?" she said, as she put it and her own weapon into a handbag. "Now come on in."

Medlin stepped in as she told the driver to proceed to the Morne d'Orange. The driver addressed his horse, there was the soft *swick* of a whip cutting the air, and the carriage began to move. Its wheels made no sound on the ash carpet and had trouble getting sufficient traction. The vehicle skidded alarmingly as it negotiated a turn.

Garrick settled back in her seat and looked along her shoulder. Her expression became mock-concerned. "You look like your feelings've really been hurt."

Medlin exhaled with some vehemence. "Until now," he said, his voice threatening to shake, "I was sure it was all a mistake, that everything'd be okay once you went back and explained. Now . . . "

"Well," she said, "I guess there's nothing like having a friend point a gun at you to make you have serious doubts about the relationship."

"How are you feeling?"

Now her expression became mock-surprised. "Is that their line? I'm this senile and dazed old dear who's wandered off in time? Or is it that I've been under a lot of stress and gone harpo?"

"Haven't you?"

"Haven't I which?"

"Either, hell, I don't know!"

"If I'd done one or the other—gone senile, gone crazy—would I be able to *say,* one way or another? I guess if you really pressed me for an answer, I'd say I've just gone fishing."

Medlin licked his gritty lips. "They say you stole two dozen ampoules of the drug."

"*Oh,*" she said happily, "I stole the drugs, all right. But I wouldn't put too much faith in anything else they told you. They're really just mad because I took my ball and went home. In their present state of mind, maybe I should say, in their future state of mind, they're liable to accuse me of anything. Was I hard to find?"

"After you checked out everything the library has on volcanoes, Martinique, and *fin de siècle?* Took us about thirty minutes to decide you'd come here and weren't just throwing us off the track. Took me most of a day to locate the hole you came through, but, then, I was dead tired. I'd just brought Witts back from watching Hitler roll up Europe. Otherwise . . . an earthmover leaves fainter tracks than you did."

"Ah. Well, you can't've had much time to familiarize yourself with the situation here." Garrick cocked an eyebrow. "By the way, where'd you tell me Ranke is?"

"I didn't."

"Well, tell me now."

"Why should I know where he is?"

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"Now don't be coy," she said, looking more amused, "it doesn't become you. We both know you're the only one who could've come after me here. But you're mush inside." Her colorless eyes locked with Medlin's and dared him either to deny the accusation or to look away. "So they had to send Ranke, too. I don't think he's arrived yet. Timing's never been his strong suit, but I've never known him to just *not* show up at all."

"He could've come to grief."

"Mm, I wouldn't bet on it. You'll bring him through, sooner or later. You're good at what you do. You damn well ought to be. I trained you."

"You trained Ranke, too."

Garrick laughed. It was no wonder Madame Boislaville had been charmed; notwithstanding the circumstances, Medlin still thought she had the pleasantest laugh he had ever heard. "And won't my face be red if he nails me! But, listen, just in case he does, you better get used to the idea of having him around, because you won't be going anywhere without him from now on. They have a *plan,* dear heart, and they're not going to let it get fouled up by anybody's mavericking. They *trust* Ranke. He's the kind of person they use to keep an eye on all the other kinds of people they use. By the way, how do you like Madame Boislaville's?"

"Best dive I've ever been in."

"Don't be a snob. I'll have you know that Madame Boislaville runs a good, clean establishment—as clean as any place can be with *this,* anyway. She does it all pretty much without help, too, except for that girl of hers. And she's not a whore, if that's what you're thinking."

Medlin looked away quickly, guiltily.

Garrick kept talking as though she had not noticed. "Sorry I couldn't afford to check you into the International Hotel or such, but we're on a budget. They didn't provide you with any money, did they? *Trés* typical. Best-case-scenario planners, every one." She took a small purse from her bag, riffled through the franc notes in it, and stuffed a handful into Medlin's coat pocket. "Don't worry, I didn't hit anybody over the head to get this. I won it mostly fair and square. Believe it or not," and she made herself look shocked for a moment, "there's *gambling* in this town! You better learn your denominations before you try to spend any of that. There're thieves in this town, too. You'll be relatively safe and well-cared-for at Madame's. She won't be as curious about your business as white folks at the International would be. You won't have to answer any hard questions."

"Mind telling me where we're going?"

"For a ride."

Medlin glared at her in exasperation. "You never *just* do *anything.*"

"Sightseeing, then. What do you think of St. Pierre so far?"

"I think things are going to hell here, but the newspaper's playing down all the volcanic activity. The authorities are discouraging people from leaving town."

She looked at him disbelievingly. "Is that stuff you came here knowing or what you've personally figured out since you got here? Oh, never mind.

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Authority is invested locally in Mayor Fouché, who of course enjoys the unqualified support of that rag, *Les Colonies*. Fouché's got his own expert, too, a science teacher from the local school, to back up his assertion that the volcano's no threat. Fouché also asserts that there's medical evidence to show that sulphur can be beneficial for chest and throat complaints. It's all politics, of course. It always is politics. Er, you *did* notice there was a primary election yesterday, didn't you?"

"I was *busy* yesterday," Medlin said testily, "noticing food riots and volcanic eruptions and stuff."

"Ah, yes, hasn't this been just the most interesting couple or three days? Always something exciting going on in Little Paris, now more than ever. Thomas probably said, Go find Garrick, and don't get blown up by the volcano. Am I right? Sure I am. I'm only too familiar with his kind of briefing. Get *in*, get it *done*, get *out*. Makes me wonder what sex's like for Mrs. Thomas."

Medlin bristled slightly. "I know the volcano erupts and destroys the town at eight o'clock Thursday morning, the eighth of May. I know thousands of people die here because city and government officials encourage them not to leave. It has something to do with every registered voter in this town actually having to vote *in* this town."

"That's barely adequate," said Garrick. "Do you know anything about bridges dropping out from under folks, a prison revolt—did you hear those rifle volleys yesterday afternoon? That tremor last night collapsed a bridge over the River Roxelane, which flows through town. A funeral party happened to be crossing at the time. All this ruckus and more *and* an election, too. The final election's scheduled for next Sunday, and it isn't for dog-catcher, either. It's for the French Chamber of Deputies, all the way over in *La Métropole*. Politics here are just like politics everyplace else. There're maybe a hundred and thirty thousand Martiniquais. Most of 'em are people of color, but, surprise surprise, it's whites who own everything—whorehouses, plantations, the government."

"The place seems pretty wide open to me."

"That's just commerce. The government's very conservative. Martiniquais may be the most racially mixed people on Earth, *and* the most race-conscious. The whites've exploited that ever since slavery was abolished and everyone was enfranchised. But their grip slipped in the last election. The coloreds finally put together a viable political party and sent a *black* senator to Paris. This election, the white party looks to suffer more embarrassment. You can see why neither party wants voters leaving town."

"Garrick, what does any of this have to do with anything?"

"Stop fidgeting. Listen, and maybe you'll learn something—besides the obvious, which is, never live on an active plate margin." Garrick pointed at the smouldering mountain through the window on Medlin's side of the cab. "There's a wild card in this deck. I give you Montagne Pelée—"

"No goddamn thanks."

"—cloud-herder, lightning-forger, and rainmaker," she went on, not

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missing a beat, "drawing to itself all the white vapors of the land, robbing lesser eminences of their shoulder-wraps and head-coverings." She smiled wistfully. "Lafcadio Hearn. Not one of the forbidden writers, just one of the forgotten ones. He also wrote that St. Pierre was the queerest, quaintest, and prettiest of all West Indian cities. He outlived the place by a couple of years. I wonder if he ever saw the photographs taken after its destruction. Place looks like Hiroshima."

Without warning, the carriage stopped, hurling them forward. In the next moment, Medlin heard the report of a gun and an exultant cheer. He looked out. The street was choked with people, including a number of soldiers. An officer was holstering his sidearm. The civilians were running about shouting excitedly. One held up a length of bamboo, and Medlin saw, impaled on its sharpened end, a writhing thing as long as the man's arm.

Garrick yelled to the driver, "Go around!" and plopped back into her seat as the carriage moved again. Pinned to her breast was an old-fashioned watch, with a dial and hands; she looked at it and murmured, "We'll still make it in time."

"What's all the shooting and shouting about?"

"Snakes. All the refugees here aren't human. Every stinging, biting thing in the jungle is on the move. Snakes, ants, centipedes. The mulatto quarter's infested with *fer-de-lances*. Dozens of people are dead of snakebite. *Now* what's the matter?"

The carriage had stopped again. "My apologies, Madame," the driver called down, "but the horse cannot climb even such a small hill as this."

"Then my friend and I shall walk. Please wait here for us. Come on, Med, I believe we're just in time."

"For what?"

"You'll see."

They stepped from the carriage at the foot of one of the hillocks that formed the amphitheater. Above them, the mouths of ancient muzzle-loading cannon gaped over a crumbling parapet. Ahead, other people were climbing the slope—well-dressed white people, ladies and gentlemen. Thick gray smoke billowed from the crater, and the ladies hurried along with the hems of their long skirts lifted clear of the ground and their parasols spread in a brave attempt to protect fair skins and good hats.

"Why," Garrick said as she and Medlin began to labor up the slope, "I do believe that's Missis Prentiss up ahead there. I keep running into her. She's the American Consul's wife. Saw her in the crowd on the Place Bertin yesterday. The idea seemed to percolate through everyone's head for a moment that the volcano's behavior was legitimate cause for worry. They were whipping themselves into a fine state of hysteria when a churchman arrived in a coach. He got 'em calmed down with a prayer. But about one minute later, the volcano started a new demonstration." She was panting as they neared the top of the hillock, but she still had

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breath enough for an exhalation that did not stop much short of a guffaw. "So much for the efficacy of prayer, even dear Missis Prentiss'."

The gentlemen and ladies assembled at the summit of the hillock. Most of them peered seaward, but one man looked around at Medlin and Garrick as they approached, and there was puzzlement in his expression.

"We're being noticed," Medlin said, trying to appear as though he were not talking.

"Well, we're white," Garrick said unconcernedly, "and well-dressed—*I* am, anyway—and we're total strangers to all these white, well-dressed folks who all know one another. But don't worry, they aren't interested in us. They came up here because they heard someone say that the sea's acting peculiarly," and she nodded toward the roadstead.

Even as Medlin looked, a stiff breeze was blowing across the harbor, shredding the veil of cinders. Behind and above the Morne d'Orange, the volcano growled bad-temperedly. After a moment, he became aware of two other sounds, one a sort of sizzling, rushing noise, the other a rising, undulating chorus of cries from the direction of the waterfront. Running figures spilled into the Avenue Victor Hugo.

"What," he said, "what's—"

Garrick consulted her antique timepiece again, and as she said, "Here it comes, right on schedule," Medlin suddenly saw as well as heard *it*, a great wave, coming hissing from the north. It was already halfway across the roadstead. It came up under two small sailing ships moored in its path, lifted them up, carried them along. They hung on the crest of the steep shoulder of water and then, as the wave avalanched with shattering impact onto the waterfront, hurtled completely over the quayside row of buildings. Houses, shops, and warehouses twisted on their foundations, disintegrated. The wave surged up the thoroughfare, rising to the second-floor balconies. It reached the lighthouse, swirled around its base, and inundated the square on which it stood. There it hesitated. It hesitated forever. Then, slowly, reluctantly, it started to retreat.

Medlin was on the ground. He had no memory of sitting down. There was a sustained moan from the other watchers on the hillock. They were pale-faced, open-mouthed, awestruck. He knew the feeling.

He got to his feet and brushed ash from his sleeve. Garrick turned to leave, but he angrily grabbed her arm. She looked at his hand and then at his face and said, "Gentlemen do not mishandle ladies."

He waved his free hand at the scene below and managed to gasp out, "What—?"

"This is nothing, Med," she said mildly, and detached herself. "Wait. You'll see."

"You keep saying that! What'll I see? More of the same?"

"Oh God, yes. More and worse. The wave was just a side-effect. Not even a prelude. We have a ways to go before it's time for the grand finale, the show-stopper—the glowing cloud! That being the literal meaning of *nuée ardente*—" she spoke the term the way she might have savored a continental delicacy "—which is the name given to the particularly nasty

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phenomenon that's going to destroy this burg. In case you neglected to research this detail, it's an incandescent cloud of rock fragments and hot gases. Pelée's going to spit out one of these horrors Thursday morning. It'll come right down that big notch in the mountainside there. It'll hit the town at incredible speed, with tremendous force."

"Why do you want me to see all of these terrible things?"

"Object lesson. It's time you looked up and saw the mountain."

"What?" But Garrick merely turned and walked away. Medlin's options were to follow her or wrestle her to the ground. He followed, and when he drew abreast he said, "It shouldn't take a genius to figure out, but damned if I know what you're up to. Unless you're trying to lose Ranke and me in all the confusion when the volcano does pop."

She pivoted on her nearer foot and stabbed a finger as hard and sharp as an antler into his breast. "I can lose you without the volcano's goddamn help, thank you. You couldn't follow my trail around the corner, and you know it."

"*I'm* not the one you have to worry about."

Garrick looked slightly sheepish. "Okay," she said, "so I *am* counting on getting a little help from Pelée. It never hurts to give yourself an edge when you're dealing with Ranke. I think he may find it hard to concentrate in this place. It's very stressful here. The air's full of static electricity, there's this stinking ash, the barometric pressure's all screwy—"

"Doesn't sound like that much of an edge to me."

She frowned. "Don't you doubt that I can lose him if I want to."

"So why don't you? Why are you still *here*?"

"I can't leave you behind, Med. I've got to get you to go with me, and you know that can only happen if you go willingly."

"Go where?"

"Anywhere!"

"What *is* this game you're playing?"

Garrick gestured at the town before them. The waterfront was a shambles. Each of the two sailing ships—mastless, shattered hulks—could be seen sitting in its own pile of rubble. "If all I was doing," she said, "was playing games, I'd've gone someplace *nice*, done something *fun*. Parisians are rioting at the premiere of Stravinsky's new ballet in nineteen thirteen. I might even've come here, in some happier year. This *is* a beautiful island, even if Little Paris is a bit lusty for my taste. But now it's hot as hell here, it stinks, and it's infested with snakes. And it's doomed. Hundreds of people've died around this volcano since Saturday. Thirty *thousand* are going to die here before it's all done. Most of 'em are going to be killed by superheated gas and politics. I know that sounds redundant, but it's the truth. Thirty thousand people, a fourth of the population of Martinique in nineteen oh two, all victims of arrogance and ignorance."

"So it's an object lesson. What'm I supposed—"

"*Learn* something from it!" Two faint reddish spots appeared high on the woman's cheekbones. "Here's a microcosm of our own world, our own

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time! Here's all this self-important scramble down here, and, up there, looming catastrophe! And like I said, it's time for you to look up and see the mountain. I'm hoping you'll go with me. If you stick with the scramblers, you're going to get wiped out with them. I don't want that to happen. You're important to me. I'm important to you, too."

"Maybe not important enough to defect for."

"Then maybe you'll think *this* is important enough. Someone, the president, the military, I don't know who, has been sold the bright idea that past events can be revised to suit present needs. Can and *should* be."

Medlin looked at her and thought, Crazy. Suspecting it before and believing it now were two different things. It hurt now that he saw just how crazy she was.

She must have seen how skeptical he was, for she said, "It's true, Med."

"Oh, come on. People've been saying crap like that since before anyone knew *how* to travel. It's a *joke.* Oh God, if only I could go back in time and not have the accident with the scoozip. Oh God, if only I could renew the insurance policy the day *before* I had the accident with the scoozip. Oh God, if only I could buy the roto *instead* of the scoozip."

Garrick grinned like a skull. "Pretend for a second I'm presenting this scheme in a really positive light, and pretend you're the president or someone impressionable like that. God, be honest, wouldn't it sound *so tempting?* Make a big mistake somewhere, lose a war or an election? No problem. Accidentally kill everybody in Arizona? Well, no big loss, but *still* no problem. Just go back, change things to make 'em come out the way you want! They're calling it 'temporal engineering.' There's no telling what havoc'll be created if those idiots ever actually give it a try."

"Maybe it wouldn't have any effect," Medlin said. "Nothing ever has before. Time's resilient, forgiving. It's accommodated us so far."

"So *far,*" she snapped, "we haven't tested its patience! We haven't tried to show it who's boss! Can you imagine the kind of force needed to really change an event so that it affects things up the way? *Experts* were brought in to say what everybody wanted to hear. That the past can be altered to produce the desired present. Isn't that a lovely term? The desired present. And here's where it stuck for me, these *experts* made it a major, fundamental point that if you want to alter the past, you have to have *complete control* of travel, because you don't want somebody *un*altering things on you. So no more mavericking around for you and me!" She paused, panting and glaring. He had never seen her quite so upset before. "The really insulting part is, they broached this insanity to me like they expected me to *go for it!*"

Medlin shook his head. "I'm just not sure I believe a word of this," he said. "Why didn't Thomas tell me anything about it? Why didn't *you?*"

"Someone—*maybe* Thomas, but I think probably not—didn't tell you because they were hedging their bet. *I* couldn't tell you because you were in nineteen forty when I decided to bolt. I couldn't wait around for you to get back. They were ready to *roll* on this thing. You'd've been told soon enough. After all, a traveler's essential to this project, and if I'm

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dead or AWOL, you're it. We're the only real travelers they've got, the only ones who can go anywhere we set our minds to, almost—anywhere there's the least little crack. I don't want to squander this gift playing fetch. Nor should you. Thomas isn't your friend. And the agency isn't your home."

"And you're not my mom."

Garrick looked pained. "I'm trying to save your *soul* here."

"To say nothing of saving the purity and essence of time. Look, forget about my soul for a minute. If temporal engineering's such a big deal with you, why don't you stop it? It's not as though you don't have clout of your own."

"Their minds are made up. The only way to stop 'em is for us to not go back and help 'em get started." She extended her hand to him; after a moment, he took it. There was nothing to it but bones and milky skin. "We can skip this depressing catastrophe," she said, "and go see Stravinsky's ballet. It's only an ocean and eleven years away."

"I don't know. What about Ranke?"

She made an impatient face. "What about him?"

"He's going to show up here whether I'm still around to take him home or not."

"Perhaps Pelée'll give him a warm welcome. If he's smart, and he sometimes is, he'll get the hell out of town."

"And we just let him wander around lost in nineteen oh two forever?"

"Do not waste your concern on Ranke. He'd find his niche wherever he is. There always is a niche for people like Ranke."

Medlin let go of Garrick's hand. His arm fell to his side. "I can't."

"Oh, God, why not?" She was the picture of exasperation.

"Because I just can't. I'm not . . . I don't know, I can't make up my mind."

"That's *always* been your problem! Well, I've got some bad news for you. You're finally going to have to take decisive action. You just can't go along and get along any more."

A darkening pall of ash and smoke lay over the town like twilight. The carriage was still waiting at the base of the hill. Driver and horse looked as though they had been carved from dirty rock. Garrick climbed into the carriage and slammed the door.

Dismayed, Medlin said, "Are you going to leave me stranded here?"

She looked out the window. "It may come to that!"

"I can't see ten meters here!"

"Wherever you are in a town this size, you're never too far from anyplace else. Just go back to the Avenue Victor Hugo. It'll lead you right back to Madame Boislaville's street."

"Maybe her street isn't there any more! Even if it is, maybe I won't be able to find it."

"I understand your distress, but we're still waiting for Ranke, remember? I've taken a big chance here already. As long as your loyalties are all tangled, I'd rather not be around you when he does pop up."

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"This is so crazy," he said sorrowfully.

"I'm going to have to kill him," she said, "or he, me. He knows you can't take me back without my cooperation. I'm sure he doesn't expect me to oblige him by going back under my own power."

"Goddammit!"

"Now, now. See you soon, I hope. Driver!"

Driver and horse shook gray powder from themselves. The carriage soundlessly pulled away. Medlin stumbled after it vengefully, but it was quickly lost to sight in the false dusk. He swore, rammed his fists into his trousers pockets, and walked slowly and half-blind to the Avenue Victor Hugo.

He came to the edge of the devastated area. The wave had been a spent force by the time it lapped around these houses. Slowed or not, it had turned the thick blanket of ash into a putrid-smelling porridge of mud seasoned with foodstuffs, utensils, odd pieces of clothing, whole and shattered pieces of furniture, stranded marine life, dead livestock, and human bodies. The living stood about numbly, and then by ones, twos, and threes they came forward, searching for their homesites, belongings, missing families. The pall was murkily suffused with light from torches and supercharged with static electricity. Brilliant streaks of lightning intermittently shot through it. There was a constant background chorus of moans and cries.

Splattered with muck, his eyes, nose, and throat burning and his stomach heaving, Medlin wandered lost in a darkened, debris-clogged maze. It was not until he found his way blocked by a mass of splintered wooden spars, shredded canvas, and tangled ropes—part of the mast and rigging of one of the ravaged ships—that he realized that he had strayed off the main thoroughfare. When he attempted to retrace his steps, he emerged onto a great sloping square. A solemn crowd lined its edges. Lying in rows in the center were scores of dead bodies. They had been dusted with quicklime and looked like broken statuary. A priest and a policeman walked side by side among the rows, the priest either calling out a name for each body or else calling on onlookers to identify it, and the policeman writing the name in a roster. The supply of coffins must have been exhausted. Soldiers were wrapping the bodies in banana leaves, loading them onto stretchers, and carrying them away.

Medlin thought of Garrick and was filled with a great hot surge of hatred that sustained him until he unexpectedly found himself standing before Madame Boislaville's house. The wave had not penetrated her street. Everything looked the same, gray, silent, unmoving, dead—*normal,* he thought sourly as he pounded on the door with the side of his fist.

She let him in and slid the bolt home with a good, solid, reassuring thunk. He sank into a chair. They regarded each other dumbly.

"I am glad," he finally told her, "to see that you are all right."

"And you, Monsieur."

"I watched the wave come, saw it hit."

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"It is—"

She could not find a word for what it was, but he nodded agreement anyway. He ran his tongue over his lips and spat at the taste.

"Madame, is there anything to drink?"

"There is still water for coffee, and some bread and pickles if you are hungry. And there is no shortage of rum."

"May I please have some rum?"

Almost before he had asked for it, there was a drink on the table. The rum cut a ravine through the sulphur bed in his mouth. He finished it and asked for another. When he had finished that one as well and asked for still another, Madame said, "Too much rum will make you sorry to be alive."

He ignored the warning and got the drink. The next thing he knew was that he was as drunk as he had ever been in his life and filled with horror and self-pity. Madame had disappeared for a time but now returned, from either the kitchen or whatever part of the building was her living quarters. There was no sympathy in her expression. She had warned him, he had ignored the warning, now here he was, the foolish American, truly sorry to be alive.

"Join me, Madame," he said thickly. "We'll drink to this doomed town."

She shook her head. "I had better make the coffee and bring you some food."

"Why are you still here?"

She had started to leave. She turned to answer. "I am here because this is my home, Monsieur."

"Your home is doomed. Look out the window."

"Perhaps the worst is past."

"This town is going to be destroyed. Anyone who stays here is going to die. There is still time to escape. Take your girl and your grandmother and go."

Distaste tugged at one corner of her mouth. "The old woman is my aunt. She is someone's aunt, anyway. Everyone on Martinique . . . but my aunt, my aunt, she tells me terrible things. She says that she has visited a wizard." Madame shuddered visibly, then crossed herself. "I have thrown her out, Monsieur. Let the wizard take her into *his* home. She terrifies my Elizabeth. The wizard told her not to place her trust in the power of white men's god. He told her that the Holy Church has made the mountain erupt and caused all the deaths."

"Whosever's fault it is, you must get out. You should have left when Madame Garrick—my great friend and mentor, ace of travelers, knower of all—should have gotten out when she told you to go. Last whenever it was."

For a moment he thought she was going to cry. Then she said, angrily, "She says that the mountain is a menace! The mayor says that it is not! I know, I *know,* that white people are great liars, but both Madame Garrick and the mayor are white, so I do not know who is lying."

"White or not, she knows what is going to happen here. So do I."

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"Perhaps yes, perhaps no. You are white, too. You could be lying as well."

"Then the hell with you."

He pushed himself out of the chair and somehow made it up the stairs to the room. He stood in the doorway, assayed some calculations based on the distance between himself and the cot, took a long step forward. The room and its meager furnishings tilted sharply and rose about him. The floor caught him, not gently.

He awoke on the cot, listening to a murmur of voices from the street outside. It hurt him to move his head. His mouth tasted of kitchen matches, a whole box of them. He had a dim memory of awakening once to call for water and at least once again to be violently sick in the chamber pot. Neither pitcher nor pot was in sight. He felt exhausted, unclean, poisoned.

He staggered to the window and leaned on the sill. In the street below the window was what first appeared to be a vast funeral procession and then resolved itself into a dense bunch of lesser processions. The black-garbed mourners jostled one another, moving from shrine to shrine, and their prayers mingled in the hot, polluted air to become a soft mush of crying, prayers for the dead, and pleas for God's intervention. There were other, harsher voices, too. Criers added to the confusion and congestion as they ran among the processions. Some shouted instructions from the Action Committee, whatever that was: everyone was to wash the ash from walls and roofs. Others were political sloganeers, broadcasting the political parties' competing messages to the illiterate segments of the electorate.

Unmindful of babble, the volcano industriously pumped out black smut. The sea was calm in the roadstead. Along the ruined waterfront burned regularly spaced fires. Medlin had no idea of what these signified, except more trouble. The sun was a ghostly orb sitting low in a cinder-filled sky, barely above the western horizon. Several seconds elapsed before the wrongness of that view registered, and then dread burst inside him like a soft, spoiled fruit. He lumbered noisily to the landing at the top of the stairs and gave a fearful raw-throated shout, *"Madame Boislaville!"*

She swept into view below. She looked surprised and wary.

"Yes, M—"

"What day," and then his headache caught up with him, forcing him to lower his voice, "what *day* is this?"

"Tuesday, Monsieur."

"How can it—Tuesday. Of course." Tuesday. Christ. He clutched the wooden bannister. Below, she wiped her hands on the apron and made her expression unfathomable. "Is there any breakfast?"

"It is almost suppertime, and I have nothing to—"

"Coffee?"

"Yes, of course, Monsieur. I shall make some and bring it up to you at once."

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"No, no. I am coming down."

"There is no food today. I am very sorry."

"No, I understand, it is all right," and, clinging to the bannister, he went painfully down the stairs.

She helped him into a chair and brought him a pot of black coffee and a cup. She also produced a pair of salty pickles, a stale heel of bread, and the latest edition of *Les Colonies*. The bread was too hard to eat, and the coffee was too hot to drink at first, so he dipped the one into the other and gratefully sucked on it. Most of *Les Colonies* was given over to an account of the previous day's disaster. A lake on the mountainside had burst its walls, sending tons of mud and debris to pile into the sea north of the roadstead. The mass had incidentally buried a sugar refinery located at the mouth of the River Blanche, north of town.

He was still hungry when he finished his repast, but his headache had subsided. He crept back upstairs to his room and fell asleep again. This time, his rest was broken intermittently by street noises and volcanic rumblings, by heat and stinks. Once, he awoke to find himself thinking about temporal engineering.

There were, he reflected, many things about the world of his proper matrix that had never bothered him very much. Eco-collapse? Never cared for a second, he told himself, that there's nothing but desert or pavement on land, and the oceans are cesspools, and everywhere you go smells like a beer fart. Money meltdown, nuclear exchange? So the world is owned in the Awful Oughts by a few greedy people who want all the other people to keep bending over and greasing their own behinds for the next reaming. So what? When have things ever been different?

It just *hasn't bothered me.*

Because I have a gift.

How can I hate the world, he thought as he turned on the cot and pressed the side of his face into the gritty pillow, when I'm free to *escape* from it whenever I like . . . ?

Still. Only a fool—not that there weren't always lots of fools—would deny that civilization was in trouble, that the planet itself was in trouble. Perhaps temporal engineering could save the day.

Only, it *hadn't* saved the day.

Then perhaps it was *about* to save the day, and this was the last moment of the old timeline, and everything would now shimmer and dissolve or do some special-effects thing, and he'd awaken with the rest of humanity in some restored Eden . . .

He wondered how one would go about heading off the more complicated disasters, and about how different his own life might be after temporal engineering. Neither line of speculation took him very far. The Awful Oughts were the culmination of some trends that had begun with the Industrial Revolution and others that went back to Sumer, possibly even to Olduvai Gorge. As for himself, surely he would still be a traveler. And surely there would still be an agency, a Garrick, a Thomas. Even a Ranke.

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Far away, seafloor twitched. Close by, the volcano gave a growl.

How much force would it take to change the past? Sleep was taking him again. How much force, measured in, say, Pelées? Two Pelées each to stop Hitler, Stalin, Breedlove? Five Pelées to disinvent styrofoam? Fifteen . . .

When he awoke next, night had fallen. His headache was back and worse than before, he was thirsty and ravenously hungry, and he could not recall having felt so wretched or so stupid in the wake of a drunk since college. Downstairs, his hostess was able to offer him coffee and a single brown banana. He ate the fruit slowly and deliberately, by the light of a lamp on the table. Madame let him drink coffee by himself for a while, then came to stand by the table. He looked up and waited. After a moment she cleared her throat softly, put her hand into the pocket of her apron, and withdrew some franc notes and coins.

"Madame Garrick paid a week's rent," she said, placing the money on the table, "and paid also for a week's meals. This is the portion intended to cover your expenses for the remainder of this week. There is no food here, even for my daughter and myself. Money cannot buy it now. The countryside is deserted, so there is no harvest. The fishermen catch nothing." She would not meet his eye. Her manner was very formal, and she addressed him so stiffly that he knew she must have devoted considerable time to composing and mentally rehearsing this speech. "The mayor says that carts have been sent to gather food from other parts of the island, but the carts do not return. Even if the mountain does not destroy the town, it has destroyed my livelihood. I do not know how to reach your friend, so I must impose upon you to return this money to her."

"Please keep it. She will never miss it. Believe me, I am certain that she would want you to keep it."

Madame drew herself up. "I cannot accept charity."

"A loan, then."

She shook her head again. "I do not know when I would be able to repay it. I am leaving for Fort-de-France in the morning. Today, I prayed to the Holy Virgin, who told me that you are right. I am going to take my Elizabeth and visit my relatives in the south."

"I think you are making a very wise decision. I shall personally escort you and your daughter to the edge of town."

"That will not be necessary."

He indicated the bolted front door with a slight jerk of his head and instantly regretted the movement. His head was still as tender as a boil. He could all but hear his brain slosh inside his skull. "Anything can happen out there now."

"Yes, I know." He heard her sigh. "Sickness is breaking out. They have lighted fires on the beach to purify the air."

He marveled at the logic of that and couldn't frame a reply.

Madame finally let herself make eye-contact with him. She said, "*La Verette* kills whites as well, Monsieur. You should take your own advice and go."

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"I have no relatives in the south."

"Will you sail away, then, on a big boat?"

"On something, I assure you."

The sound of an explosion passed over them. The woman cried out, and Medlin jerked violently and spilled coffee on himself. He heard a rattling of shelves from the bar and next, as the bang faded, a shrill note like the sound of a titan's train whistle. He realized that he was standing, open-mouthed, with saliva pooling in the back of his throat. He gulped hard, almost choked. The whistling persisted for several minutes before trailing off.

"I must go to the cathedral," Madame said in a quavering voice, "and offer prayers for our deliverance."

Prayer, he started to tell her, will not prevent what is going to happen here, but he saw her eyes widen suddenly, saw her listen and cross herself hurriedly. He said, instead, "What is it?"

She shushed him.

He listened hard.

The drumming was ragged and muted at first, but it steadied quickly, sharpened and rose in volume, became frenzied. He could hear shouts, too.

One damned thing after another, he thought, and asked again, "What is it?"

"*Wizards.*" Her reply was almost inaudible. There was an especially sustained burst of yelling, and then he could hear them approaching. He extinguished the lamp with a puff of breath, moved toward the window, and peered through the crack between the shutters. He saw nothing. A din of singing, shouting, and drumming passed at no very great distance, and, as it did, behind him, the terrified woman hissed, "*Monsieur!*"

"Where are they going, Madame?" There was no answer. He looked over his shoulder, and sensed rather than saw her standing wrapped in darkness at the center of the room. "Where are they going?"

She moaned but made no other sound.

"We'll be safe here," he said. "I have a gun." He patted his coat pocket, then remembered that Garrick had taken it. He kept talking. "You should go see about your daughter. Reassure her. And try to get some rest. You will both need your rest if you are going to Fort-de-France tomorrow." Yeah, right, he told himself, as if anyone could rest. "Pray, Madame. Pray for—" Pray for whatever one prayed for.

He went to the table and groped around its edge to her side. She seemed to be standing very rigidly with her arms pressed tightly against herself and her hands clasped over her bosom as in prayer. She was still moaning as he took both of her hands in his. Either she was numb with fear or else the gesture simply astonished her, for she did not resist or react in any way at first. Her hands were dry and much harder than he had expected them to be. They were the rough, strong hands of someone who worked like a mule every day of her life. They felt more real than his own hands. He could not see her face, but imagined it, and wondered

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how old she really was, and what the life expectancy of a West Indian mulatto woman could have been—could *be,* here, now—at the beginning of the twentieth century. She suddenly started like someone awakening from a nap. He made no attempt to hold on as she withdrew her hand from his. Wordlessly, she turned and stumbled away.

Depressed, he sat down by the shuttered window and listened. After a time, he caught himself nodding and got up sharply and walked around the room once. Then he went to his room and cautiously opened the shutter. There was nothing to see except the glow of the volcano's mouth. There was nothing to hear except the noises made by earth and sea and town, each restless and unhappy. The shouting and singing had died away, and even the drumming had become subliminal. Medlin stretched out on his cot and closed his eyes. Sometime later, he was shaken awake by a loud report from the volcano. The summit of the mountain looked like a blast furnace; over it was a cloud filled with lightning.

He did not sleep again after that. Wednesday's sunrise was the saddest he had ever seen. With it came a resumption of the volcano's grumbling. Lightning flashed among the clouds, and thunder rumbled down the mountainside. The sea was full of wreckage swept down from forest and field during the night. The dozen ships lying in the roadstead looked as though they had run aground on small islands.

It took most of the morning to load Madame's belongings for the exodus to Fort-de-France. The woman did not travel lightly. The cart she had got from somewhere was a bed of mismatched planks mounted between two solid wooden wheels. Hitched to this creaking, swaying conveyance was a horse hardly bigger than a large breed of dog. Medlin could not imagine that under the best of circumstances it would have been capable of budging the cart emptied, let along with the girl Elizabeth and household goods aboard, and its nose and lungs irritated by volcanic ejecta. At the woman's urging, however—she pulled gently yet firmly with one hand at its harness and, with the other, flicked a long switch over its back but did not touch its ashy hide—the horse got moving with an easy indifference to the loaded cart. Medlin padlocked the gate to the courtyard and took his station, as he imagined it to be, on the animal's opposite flank. They turned a corner and passed the front of the building. Madame did not pause for a farewell look at her locked and shuttered home. She set her mouth in a ruler-straight line and flicked the switch again to let the horse know she would not stand for dawdling.

The cart made its slow way through and out of the town. Medlin walked with his head hurting and the sour taste of the air in his mouth. He was grateful that Madame seemed disinclined to chat. He saw a few soldiers ahead as the cart approached the junction with the road to Fort-de-France, and because he had no desire to be asked questions by them, he looked across the horse's back at the woman and said, "This is where I get off."

She said, very seriously, "Now you are on the street again. I am sorry that your visit to St. Pierre could not have been a happier one."

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"The bath and the gumbo were first-rate, and the rum, too." That brought a faint, fleeting smile to her lips. He was pleased to see it. "Perhaps the next time," he began, but she cut him off with an emphatic shake of her head.

"There will be no next time," she said flatly. "Farewell, Monsieur."

"Farewell, Madame."

"May God be with you."

"And with you," and he asked himself, Why not?

He stopped walking and let the cart pull away. Madame did not look back at him. The girl sat high upon a pile of bundles. When he saw her turn her cat-eyed gaze his way, he gave her a little wave. She did not return it. Congratulating himself on the way he had with children, he looked back at the town. It was the color of the surface of the moon. The muttering volcano was half-hidden by its own gray pall of smoke. The afternoon was passing hot, dark, and noisy.

Well, he thought, how much goddamn longer do I have to stay in this hellhole before I can decently abort the mission? It wouldn't make Thomas happy when he reported failure, but, then, Thomas was so rarely happy anyway. What did Thomas want him to *do?* Garrick had escaped —at least, Medlin hadn't sensed her since, when had it been, Monday?—and Ranke was a no-show.

He glanced after Madame Boislaville and did a double-take and stared. The soldiers had stepped forward at her approach, and she had halted the cart, and now he could see much gesticulating and hear the woman's voice raised in protest. Flabbergasted, he watched her turn the cart around and head back toward the town. He shook off his amazement and ran forward.

She did not slow the cart as he drew near. She looked as dangerous as the mountain itself as he fell in beside her and tried to walk, talk, look at her, and glare back at the soldiers all at the same time.

She cut him short. "The road to Fort-de-France is blocked," she said. "The soldiers say their orders came from the governor himself."

"Did you tell them you cannot stay here? That—"

"The soldiers do not care what anyone but the governor tells them."

"I shall go talk to them!"

"Yes," she said, "certainly they must be more willing to listen to a dirty American stranger than to a respectable widow," and the long switch hissed and snapped over the horse's back, and the cart kept moving.

They walked some distance wrapped in sullenness. Finally, Medlin said, "Madame, you and the girl must slip past the guards tonight."

She said, as she might impart an obvious fact to a stupid child, "The wizards will be out again tonight. They will kill anyone they find on the road."

"Then go by boat! I don't care *how* you get out, but you *must* get out!"

She seemed to be thinking it over, so he said no more. He noticed a

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small group of people gathered to examine a poster on a public bulletin board and stepped forward to read it.

Extraordinary Proclamation
to My Fellow Citizens of St. Pierre

The occurrence of the eruption of Mount Pelée has thrown the whole island into consternation. But aided by the exalted intervention of the Governor and of superior authority, the Municipal Administration has provided, in so far as it has been able, for distribution of essential foods and supplies. The calmness and wisdom of which you have proved yourselves capable in these recent anguished days allows us to hope that you will not remain deaf to our appeals. In accordance with the Governor, whose devotion is ever in command of circumstances, we believe ourselves able to assure you that, in view of the immense valleys which separate us from the crater, we have no immediate danger to fear. The lava will not reach as far as the town. Any further manifestion will be restricted to those places already affected. Do not, therefore, allow yourselves to fall victims to groundless panic. Please allow us to advise you to return to your normal occupation, setting the necessary example of courage and strength during this time of public calamity.

—The Mayor, R. FOUCHÉ

Behind him, Madame asked softly, "What does it say?"

Barely able to contain his anger, he replied, "Nothing. Not a damn thing."

He barred the gate after she had driven the cart into the courtyard. The girl leaped down and vanished. Medlin helped her mother unhitch the cart and put the horse away, and then Madame led him into the back of the house. He had an impression of impersonal space given over to the utilitarian. It was gloomy and hot, and the ash was ubiquitous. The cafe area itself had acquired a dilapidated, disconsolate air during their brief absence.

Madame said, "I think there is still water for coffee in one of the storage jars. Perhaps even enough for washing."

"That would be wonderful, Madame."

The girl emerged without warning and in a hurry from the rear. She went straight to her mother, who instinctively wrapped both arms around her, and glared back over her own shoulder. Madame looked past Medlin and started. Medlin, whose back was to the doorway, heard his name spoken.

Ranke stood framed in the doorway and looked very pleased with the

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effect he was having. Throughout the years of their acquaintance, whenever he did not have the man actually in view, Medlin had always seen him in his mind's eye as being taller, leaner, steelier—Ranke admired those qualities and aspired to them, and had some odd knack for leaving people with the impression that he possessed them. In fact, as Medlin realized whenever he actually did see him again, Ranke was no taller or leaner than he was, and the steeliness was only the intent look of a predator, not necessarily a mammalian one. Ranke's light-colored and lidless gaze took in Madame at a glance, but lingered on the girl as though she might be prey, before coming smoothly back to Medlin. He said, "What day is it?"

"Wednesday," said Medlin, "the day before the eruption—" He shot a horrified look at Madame and saw that he need not have worried. Nothing he could have said would have got her attention from Ranke at that moment.

Ranke stepped into the room and said, without rancor, "Took your own sweet time getting me here."

Medlin did not reply. The man frequently did leave him with nothing to say. Instead, he turned to Madame. "You said you thought you still have some water for coffee."

It seemed all she could do to look away from the unblinking serpent, the staring-eyed hawk. "Y-yes."

"May we have some, please?"

"Yes. Of course, Monsieur."

Ranke stepped around to the left to vacate the doorway. The girl broke out of her mother's embrace and bolted through to safety. Madame herself edged toward the doorway from the right. The look of satisfaction on Ranke's face made a scowl start to build itself on Medlin's. Medlin said, "Let's keep this private," and led him up to the room, where Ranke looked about fascinatedly. When he spoke, there was amazement or amusement in his voice, or both.

"Some terrific base of operations you picked out here."

"Garrick picked it out. She had everything set up before I even got here."

"I know you've seen her, talked to her. I can smell her on you." Ranke half-smiled; one cheek dimpled. He moved to the windows and threw open the shutters. Without looking at Medlin, he said, "Why didn't you arrest her when you had her?"

"I didn't think it was part of my job. Anyway, she took my gun away from me."

Ranke shook his head and took out his own weapon. It was a Colt .38-calibre automatic, either an original or a replica. He was as likely to have the one as the other. He checked the chamber and polished the four-inch barrel on his sleeve. "I could have predicted that outcome. She took your balls away from you years ago. Still, it's not going to look good on the report, sport."

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"Don't brandish that thing. She was expecting me. She's been expecting both of us, in fact. She says either you or she is going to have to die here, because she's not going back."

Ranke sighted along the barrel of the pistol at Medlin's sternum. "Pretty tough talk for an old lady. Did she say what she expects you to be doing while she and I are all locked together in mortal combat and everything? You going to be the scorekeeper, the cheerleader? The prize?"

"I'm getting just a little sick and tired of having guns pointed at me."

"All in fun."

"Even in fun. *Especially* in fun."

Ranke chuckled and lowered the pistol. "You won't always be so special, you know. Even with Garrick gone. Sooner or later, the agency'll land someone who knows the same tricks."

"You know it's not tricks. It's talent. Talent's rare."

"Not as rare as you think."

Medlin had never seen anyone look so smug before. He said, "You'll never be a traveler. You pitch wild."

"We're not alone here."

"I've seen them, too. I saw them the first night I was here."

"If you could see what *I* see—" Ranke gestured vaguely at the tableau outside the window. "All these different trails, like blurs of light on time-exposed film. They're threaded through the streets and criss-cross the hills up there. It looks like weaving with airplane contrails. There're a dozen people here who—" he grinned his predator grin and wagged a finger in the air admonishingly "—shouldn't *be* here. Most of them, sure, are passengers. But at least *one* of them has to be a traveler, and maybe there's more than just one. If they've come to this little hellhole, they must have travelers to spare."

"They may not be as accommodating as you'd like. I didn't get the time of day out of them."

"I guess eventually we're going to find out just *how* accommodating they can be. The day when we all just pretend not to notice other time-travelers and don't get involved with them is over. There's a plan now, and it'll only work if everyone sticks to it and does what they're supposed to."

"Ah yes," Medlin said, "the coming world order. Or should I call it the coming world re-order?"

"The world's in a mess. Things've got to change. From now on, whenever we run into other visitors, whoever they are, wherever they're from, they're going to have to listen to us. We'll tell them, These are our rules, you have to obey them from now on. You want to hear Lincoln talk at Gettysburg or see Catherine the Great screw the pony, you have to do things according to our rules. Otherwise, there's chaos."

"Garrick told me a little about those rules."

Ranke rolled his eyes ceilingward. "We both know what a talent she

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has for description. I'm sure she's told you there's some great mischief afoot."

"I'm not as convinced as she is," said Medlin, "that temporal engineering's possible. I'm more concerned about being on a leash."

"Ah. I *thought* she'd try to get you to go maverick with her if she had the chance."

"She may yet succeed."

"Listen to me, Medlin." Ranke stopped toying with the automatic and slipped it back into his pocket as a token of his own seriousness. "You and I have always cordially detested each other. I know you think I'm jealous of the interest she's always shown in you. You think her interest is affection. It isn't. It's self-interest. She thinks of you as her only peer and also as her only rival. She's always kept you close, by her side and on her side, so you couldn't be used against her some day. She wants to run now, but she can't leave you behind. She'd always be looking over her shoulder if she did. But if she did talk you into going with her, you think you wouldn't be on a leash then? She'd never let you out of her sight. Whether you stick with us or go with her, she'll end up trying to kill you."

Medlin's face felt as hot as the volcano's.

"I also know," Ranke went on, "you think I'm jealous because you're a traveler. Nothing is farther from the truth. I do pitch wild, and it's inconvenient. It forces me to rely on you. But inconvenient is all it is. I'm the world's best tracker, and only some of that's thanks to that old woman. As soon as it gets dark, we'll get on her trail."

"Waiting for dark's not such a great idea. Voodoo worshippers've taken over the streets at night."

"All the more reason," Ranke said, "for us to get a move on," and he grabbed Medlin's arm to haul him up. "Come on, it's check-out time."

"Let me go. I'm already worn out from walking. I hurt my leg the first night I was here, and I'm still limping."

"*Pobrecito.*" Ranke had pulled him up and out of the room, and now they plunged down the stairs, almost upsetting Madame, who was carrying a tray with cups and coffee pot. Ranke seemed not to notice her at all. He went straight to the door and unbolted it. Behind them, the woman shrieked a protest and dropped her tray. Ranke still had hold of Medlin's coat and jerked him outside into the street by it. Snarling, Medlin twisted free, just in time to see the door slam shut. He heard the bolt go home with resounding finality.

"Nice going," he said. He was trembling with anger. "She wouldn't let Jesus himself back in now. Were you Custer in a previous life? Between Garrick and us are probably hundreds of voodoo worshippers!"

Ranke did not reply at once. He stood very quietly in the middle of the street, lost in thought. He was still clean—entirely too clean for St. Pierre—and the few passersby not in a wholly numbed state looked at him in wonder. Medlin thought for a moment that he saw uncertainty in the vertical groove that appeared between Ranke's eyebrows, and he

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guessed that atmospheric phenomena might indeed be interfering with the man's ability to locate Garrick's trail. But then Ranke smiled and swatted him on the arm and said to him as cheerily as though they had been bosom pals forever, "Come on, let's get moving."

They got moving. The volcano began to grumble and sputter again. It was all Medlin could do to keep from staring at it. It was all he could do to keep walking. Ranke completely ignored the demonstration and strode with the purposeful air of a hunting dog that knew exactly where its quarry was hunkered down. He was the one happy person in St. Pierre. The volcanic tumult did not last long, and when it subsided, silence descended over the town. Ash lay drifted like dirty snow against walls and in corners. All shutters were closed. It again occurred to Medlin that everyone was already dead, that the glowing cloud, when it came, would sweep through a city already extinct. The sun was setting as they reached the Avenue Victor Hugo. Ranke walked easily, almost sauntering. Medlin marched along with his fists deep in his coat pockets, choking on ash and fury, mad at Ranke, mad at the volcano, mad at the world. A number of refugees, men, women, children, sat or crouched in the doorways. They murmured among themselves if they talked at all. Most of them simply sat and stared at nothing that Medlin could see.

An elegant coach and pair came gliding ghostlike down the street. It slowed as it approached a group of soldiers and stopped before them just as Medlin and his companion passed behind them. The door was flung open, and a thick-bodied man wearing an ornate uniform struck a pose with one foot in the cab and the other on the step. He obviously expected to be recognized, and looked slightly crestfallen when the soldiers regarded him incuriously.

"I," he announced, "am Governor Mouttet!"

The soldiers exchanged looks among themselves and shuffled to suggest a military unit dressing its ranks. Behind them, Medlin heard Ranke snicker softly and said, "Wait," and stopped walking. Ranke looked annoyed but waited. Medlin's head filled with crazy ideas. He wondered if he might not somehow get Ranke's automatic away from him and force this Mouttet at gunpoint to evacuate the town. He wondered if he might not shoot Mouttet on principle, and Ranke as well, now that he thought about it. He wondered, as he realized the futility of grappling with Ranke, if Ranke might not shoot him, not fatally, just on principle.

Anger and perplexity were struggling for supremacy on the governor's face. He looked from one soldier to the next. "What," he demanded, "are you doing here?"

"Waiting, sir," said one man, "for the *bourhousses* to strike again."

"Again?"

"At dawn this morning, sir, the soldiers guarding the road to Fort-de-France were attacked by the voodoo worshippers. Two soldiers were strangled."

This obviously was all news to Governor Mouttet. He withdrew his head into the coach and conferred with another man, less flamboyantly

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attired, and a woman whom Medlin took to be Madame Mouttet. She was well-dressed but looked very anxious. After a moment, the governor thrust himself out again. He had begun to look somewhat choleric.

"Where," he demanded, "are the soldiers who are *supposed* to be patrolling the road?"

The corporal shrugged. "Somewhere in the town, sir."

"On whose authority?"

"I do not know, sir. Perhaps their own, sir!"

Governor Mouttet opened his mouth, closed it, and retreated into his coach. The driver cracked his whip. It was the crispest sound Medlin had heard in days, and it galvanized him. Before Ranke could have known what he was about, he pushed past the soldiers and leaped after the coach as it began to move. He got a foot on the step and the fingers of one hand around the frame of the door. "Governor Mouttet!" he yelled. "Order the immediate evacuation of the town!"

The two men and the woman gaped. Medlin heard the whip an instant before it wrapped itself around his neck and head and tried to slice off his ear. He screamed and lost his grip and landed on what must have been the last patch of uncushioned cobblestone pavement in St. Pierre. The side of his head was on fire.

The coach moved away without a sound and vanished into the gloom.

Ranke was speaking to the soldiers in conciliatory tones. When he turned from them toward Medlin, his big friendly smile became the reptilian grimace of a crocodile. He helped Medlin stand, and while making a show of helping him brush himself off said, "Would've served you right if the coachman'd taken your ear off."

Medlin carefully felt along his scalpline. His fingers came away bloody.

"Don't do that again," Ranke said conversationally as he started tying his handkerchief around Medlin's head. "I mean it."

"Ranke, I know how scary you are. But—"

"Good. Now let's get out of here before these soldiers become any more curious about us. I told 'em you're drunk, so act it."

"But I'm *not afraid of you*."

"Meaning, of course, that my threats and implied threats don't faze you, because you're my ride home. Fine. Be scared of whomever, whatever you like. But just don't make any more sudden moves like that, or I'll really *hurt* you," and he pulled the handkerchief too tightly over Medlin's injured ear, "and I mean, really, *really* hurt you."

Gripped by a hand he could not resist, Medlin made himself a drag on the other man's arm and said, "Listen."

Ranke barely slowed and barely looked his way. "Well? You have something to say?"

"No, *listen*."

They listened. The drumming was beginning. Medlin heard someone—several people—running on the street behind them. He looked over at Ranke. "The voodoo people are about to put in an appearance."

"What're they going to do, come at us with cute little wax dolls?"

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"Come at us with cute little steel machetes, more likely. Try to strangle us. Do something unpleasant to us, in any case. We've got to get indoors."

"More delay," Ranke said, shaking his head. He took out his pistol.

Medlin looked at him aghast. "You can't go around indiscriminately gunning down denizens!"

Ranke laughed. "*You* can't go around indiscriminately trying to *save* them! These people're all going to be dead in a few hours anyway. They're fair game. Besides, you moron—we're about to get mugged!"

A torchlit procession surged along the street toward them. At its head, men and women sang and danced. Some were trying to dance and drink; they splashed more liquor on themselves than in, but appeared not to mind. Behind them were the drummers, and next came three fantastic-looking figures. One of these held a squirming form, and Medlin thought, incredulously, A child? Then he saw that it was a bound goat. Each of the other two wizards carried aloft a fluttering, protesting chicken.

As soon as the celebrants saw the two white men, a howl went up. Several men armed with machetes ran out ahead of the procession. Medlin saw Ranke check the chamber of his pistol and take aim.

"Christ, Ranke!"

Fist on hip, Ranke glanced sideways at him and said, "Now don't go away."

"Shoot over their heads, scare them off!"

"They'll be scared a lot farther off if I nick the paint off a couple of them."

"If we're after Garrick, let's go *get* her, but—"

There was a flash of fire from the pistol's muzzle, and a shuddering little report. One of the advancing men gave a yelp and hit the ground like an empty suit of clothes. It enraged his companions. They raced forward, yelling, and Ranke yelled back and fired again into the rushing dark forms. Torches dipped, shadows elongated weirdly, brown-stained metal blades were raised. Medlin, already backing away, already turning and drawing his arms up and going into a crouch preparatory to pushing off at a dead run, saw Ranke's eyes slitted and his teeth bared in a puma's snarl. He looked very happy. Then his automatic jammed, and he had only enough time to say *"Shit!"* before the first machete blade and then the second and the third and the fourth descended in arcs and chopped him apart as if he were merely some obstinate jungle growth.

Medlin had already sprung away.

Once, as he ran, he tripped and went sprawling on the rough pavement, but there was yelling close behind him, and he scrambled forward on his toes and fingers like a dog for a short distance until he regained his feet. The air scourged his throat and lungs; it was like breathing hot sand. The buildings closed in on him from either side. Something reached up out of the earth itself to trip him. Something else gave a triumphant cry as it landed on his back. A wire or cord whipped about his throat. A knee as hard as teak pressed into the small of his back, and there was warm stinking breath on his cheek. Then he heard another gunshot and a

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startled grunt. The wire was suddenly gone, and the knee. Medlin, gasping, felt himself being lifted up, felt himself weightless. There were voices, but he was unable to concentrate on them. Everything receded for a time, and then returned more slowly than it had gone away. Serpents, he thought, wild pigs.

He was lying on ashy ground in what he took to be a small clearing. He could see a treetop-edged patch of red-tinted sky above. There were four, five, or six glowing people present, some of them moving about, making it impossible for him to get an accurate count. One, however, was kneeling over him, examining his throat. Another stood behind this man and looked down over his shoulder at Medlin.

"Where am I?" Medlin croaked.

"Safe," said the kneeling man. "Inside the botanical gardens."

"Relatively safe," said the person standing behind him. "This is no place for tourists."

Medlin recognized the second speaker as one of the luminous men he had seen—how many nights before?

"Civilization's falling apart here," the flat-faced man said.

Medlin said, "Who the hell are you?"

A familiar voice said, "Fine way to talk to folks who just saved your life," and Garrick's nimbused head appeared over the shoulder of the flat-faced man. "Med, this is Doctor Leonard Beers, and that's his assistant, Frank Cooley, checking your neck. Doctor, Mister Cooley, this is my young friend Medlin whom I've told you about."

Medlin looked up at Beers and said, "Doctor, we probably could've avoided a whole lot of melodrama just now if you hadn't been so stuck up a few nights ago."

Beers did not look concerned. "Frankly, Mister Medlin, I thought you were a drunken tourist at the time. In any case, we have no interest in anyone's business here but our own." He turned to Garrick then and said, "You'll have to excuse me now, we've got a lot of work to do," and strode off without waiting for a reply.

"Bit of a cold fish," Medlin said.

Garrick shrugged. She was wearing a broad-brimmed hat and men's clothing, loose shirt, loose trousers. "He just really isn't too keen on getting involved in our affairs, or letting us get involved in his. I'm sure he'd despise our little intrigues if he knew much about them. Here."

She handed him a cup of water and a foodstick. The water was cold and delicious but hurt his throat. The foodstick was stale, chalky, and impossible to swallow.

"The voodoo people killed Ranke," he gasped after draining the cup.

Garrick gave a soft snort. "I guess they didn't buy his rough-tough act," she said. "I never could make him understand that *machismo* will get you hurt faster than anything."

Medlin looked around. The strangers were fiddling with odd devices or packing equipment. Beers cut in among them like a factory foreman, barking instructions.

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Medlin said, "Who are these people?"

"What *we* started out to be—scientists, historians. They're here to study and record the eruption. Pelée, Tambora, Krakatau, they're recording all the biggest and most famous ones. Nobody, no competent observer, anyway, ever saw a glowing cloud until Pelée. Nobody was set up to study Pelée until after the Ascension Day eruption, or even had the instruments. Volcanology was barely a science in nineteen oh two. Anyway, they'll be clearing out as soon as they finish setting up their monitoring devices. They've got an observation station set up on the heights south of the destruction zone."

"But where're they *from?*"

"I believe they postdate us," she said. "As always, everyone's treating everyone else like a denizen. Mustn't talk, can't say, won't get involved. Still, they did help me carry you into the gardens after I plugged that strangler."

"Ranke knows—knew they were here. I think he was starting to have designs on their travelers."

"Well, Ranke's dead, and they only have the one traveler anyway." She laughed softly. "But, ah, he is worth having designs on."

"You're incorrigable. How long do we have now?"

"Hours. The climactic eruption starts at seven fifty-two A.M."

"Well," Medlin said drily, "I sure don't want to miss seeing the climactic eruption, now do I?"

Beers happened to overhear that. Arms akimbo, he said, very sternly, "I would advise you not to see it from here."

Oblivious to irony, Medlin thought, and said, "What about Morne Rouge?"

"What about Morne Rouge?"

"Is it safe? Safe tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, yes. But you haven't a chance of reaching it tonight."

Something made Medlin ask, "Is it safe later?"

"Later?" The scientist seemed surprised by the question."Well, if you mean—it catches holy hell at the end of August."

"Deaths?"

Beers shrugged. "Not as many as here. Probably not more than two thousand in all." He saw something being done wrong and walked away to see that it was done right.

Medlin did not know why he should have felt more pain at the thought of two thousand denizens dying at Morne Rouge five months from now than at the thought of thirty thousand killed in St. Pierre tomorrow morning. For all he knew, Father Hayot and his two hundred forlorn parishioners had not lingered any longer at Morne Rouge than at St. Pierre. Until this moment, he didn't know that he had been rooting for the priest and his flock. At least they had shown better sense than anyone in Little Paris. He found himself wanting to think that they would somehow survive all of the volcano's tantrums, even as he found himself disbelieving that any denizen, lacking precise knowledge of the future,

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could possibly escape. The lethal ingenuity of human beings was as nothing compared with that of Pelée. If it failed to kill you with lava or poison gas or a mudslide, it could always send a big wave to drown you, or *fer-de-lances,* or a tumbling hogshead.

He looked mournfully at Garrick, who murmured, "Some denizen you met?"

"Denizens."

"Shouldn't get so attached, Med."

"I know. But all of a sudden I'm really tired of being detached."

Rain began to patter around them. Medlin looked up and let the warm drops strike his ashy face. It felt good until he touched his cheek. Then it just felt slimy. Garrick stood up grousing about her old bones, and they moved to stand under a tree. Medlin heard the muffled pealing of bells striking the hour and counted the strokes. It was ten o'clock.

Garrick produced a flat case and a penlight from her bag. She opened the case and trained the penlight on its contents. Medlin saw two dozen slender, gleaming ampoules.

"There's enough here," she said, "to get both of us through a dozen trips if nineteen oh two doesn't work out."

"Eventually, we'll run out."

"Big deal. Eventually, we'll run out and not be able to travel first-class any more. But we'll still be able to travel."

"It's rough without drugs."

"So's childbirth, I hear, but women who don't have drugs still have babies. We'll just have to be careful not to throw up on anyone important or bad-tempered when we arrive someplace. Consider the alternative, Med. Even if just the idea of temporal engineering doesn't scare the ass off you . . . we'd become cargo vessels, and there'd be someone else's hand on the tiller *all the time.* The cargo'd be people like Ranke and people a lot worse than Ranke. That's your fate, if you go back."

That was the last thing Medlin remembered hearing for a while. A deep rumbling from the volcano woke him from a doze. Garrick was still sitting beside him, watching the scientists work. The noise increased, and then came a billowing mass of red smoke. Medlin sat up in alarm. Garrick calmly looked at her watch again, then said, "It's still just demonstrating. But we need to be leaving soon. If we are going to leave."

"You know I'm not going back. Before we fly off somewhere, though—" Medlin looked at her very seriously "—I want to help Madame Boislaville escape from St. Pierre."

Garrick pulled dubiously on her chin. "Maybe she's supposed to die with all her neighbors in the morning. And even if she isn't—"

"Maybe she isn't. She told me you yourself urged her to go visit her relatives in the south."

Garrick seemed slightly abashed. "I wasn't trying to force events. I just thought I'd give them a little nudge. Maybe she *isn't* supposed to die in the morning. Maybe the reason she doesn't is that a crazy white boy

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rescues her. What do you, as the crazy white boy, propose to do with her once you've rescued her?"

Medlin shrugged. "Wish her a long and happy life in Fort-de-France."

"Med, whether she lives or dies, what difference does it really make? She's still a ghost."

"No, you're wrong. You can't really believe what you just said. Otherwise, why would you have bothered even to try to nudge events, as you call it? Denizens or not, anomalies or not, we're— Ranke didn't think these people were real at all, and they hacked *him* to pieces."

"You know what I mean." Garrick heaved a great sigh. "Look, did I tell you how I met Clara Prentiss? Missis Prentiss, the American Counsul's wife? It was last Friday morning, just after I'd arrived and just after the volcano'd started to act up. We weren't exactly formally introduced. I only happened to see her on the street. In a wonderful display of futile and misdirected concern, she tried to rescue a suffocated bird that'd fallen in the road. I took it away from her and threw it away and told her not to waste her sentiment. She looked at me like I'd arrived from a moon of Saturn."

"Sometimes," said Medlin, "you *act* like it. Between nineteen forty and here, I've seen too many people killed by Stukas and volcanoes and crap. I just don't think I can stand to be around denizens any more and go on telling myself, Well, this is their world, these are their lives, aw gee, that was their deaths. We're going to be living entirely among them from now on. We've got to stop thinking of them as people who've been in their graves for hundreds of years."

"If you save her, you become responsible for the woman's life, and her daughter's, and for all their descendants."

"I think if time's been resilient enough to accommodate us all this while, it ought to be able to accommodate a couple of denizens just this once."

"*Aiee*. You're cutting it thin with this rescue."

"I'll get out in time."

"Christ, as long as you're determined to go through with this madness—" Garrick dug around in her bag and handed over a revolver "—you better take this. In case we run into the voodoo people again."

"We? If you don't approve, don't come along."

"Well, I can't have you changing your mind about going AWOL as soon as you're out of my sight." Something Ranke had said nagged at Medlin. He set the thing carefully to one side in his mind, to be examined later. Garrick was looking at her watch again. "Besides," she said, "someone's got to keep time. We don't want to be sitting too close to the stage when the show starts."

They stood up, and Garrick sought out Beers, who seemed very uncomfortable as she thanked him for his help. He said, without looking at Medlin, "I thought you were going with us. The *quimboiseurs* aren't likely to attack a group the size of ours."

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She shook her head. "I'm too old to go trekking through any jungle at night. Anyway, the streets're pretty quiet now. Even wizards have to go home and explain to their wives why they've been out so late. My friend and I'll take the coast road south."

"Then good luck to you," said Beers, "and your friend."

Each with gun in hand, Medlin and Garrick slipped past the gates of the botanical gardens. It was five-thirty by the antique watch. Dawn, the eighth of May, Thursday, Ascension Day, looked and felt like the inside of a filthy pressure cooker. Dirty red smoke hung above the crater. Pierrotins were emerging from their homes. Most of them drifted like sleepwalkers in the direction of the cathedral.

At Madame Boislaville's, all the shutters had been closed and the cracks stuffed with rags. Medlin pounded on the door and called her name, but got no response. He walked around to the courtyard gate and carefully aimed at the padlock. It took two shots from the revolver, a Smith & Wesson .38-calibre housegun, to shatter the big padlock. He ran into the courtyard and began banging on the shutters at the rear of the house. He identified himself loudly and kept shouting her name. Finally, suddenly, a shutter on one of the upstairs windows opened. She was only a dark shape, outlined by the glow of a candle.

"Go away!" she cried out to him. "Go to your own kind!"

Garrick appeared beside him and raised her empty hand in greeting. "Madame Boislaville!" she said out gaily. "How delightful to see you again!"

"We must leave this town *now*," Medlin said. "We have come to give you safe passage to Fort-de-France."

"The wizards—"

They held up their revolvers for her to see, and Garrick declared that any wizard who showed his face would be shot. Madame made no reply. The shutter remained open for a few more seconds, then closed with a rattle. Medlin looked up at it unhappily, convinced that she had made up her mind to die in her home. The same thought must have occurred simultaneously to Garrick, for she began, with a shrug in her tone, "If she's determined not to be rescued—"

Down from the mountain came the sound of a great detonation. It was followed in short order by a second and then a third. Garrick nervously fingered her watch. Finally, she said, "We really do have to—"

Madame Boislaville's rear door opened, and she appeared looking hot, tired, dirty, and unfriendly. She was clutching her beads in one hand and made the other into a fist. Medlin had thought the heat in the courtyard was suffocating, but the mass of air that oozed out past her to envelope him was as dense and heavy as lead.

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"Madame," he said, "I implore you to leave with us at once."

"I . . . "

Garrick went to the woman's side. "Madame Boislaville," she said, "this young man is determined to save you from the mountain. Please go get your daughter while he hitches your cart."

"The horse is dead . . . "

"Then we must walk," Garrick said, "and we must start immediately."

The two women turned and moved into the building. Medlin stationed himself in the doorway. He overheard a brief argument about belongings; Garrick insisted that there was no time to gather them. She returned leading Madame, who was wrapped in a shawl and leading Elizabeth by one hand, carrying only a rosary in the other. Medlin brought up the rear. Garrick urged them to hurry as they entered the street, and they moved at a fast walk through the gloom. As they passed over the rim of the amphitheater, they paused to look back. The volcano's incandescent eye peered through a great sifting veil of airborne debris. The pall dispersed as a warm, sulphurous wind blew down the mountainside. The sun shone down on St. Pierre, revealing a roadstead full of anchored ships and, high on Pelée's side, a great glowing patch. They hurried on, and only Medlin looked back again. Each time, the town seemed to have sunk a little farther into the earth until at last it vanished altogether. Little Paris, Little Sodom, goodbye, he thought.

As the soldier had told Governor Mouttet, there were no guards to turn back refugees now. But there were not many refugees. A few riders and carriages passed the four, hurrying along the road without acknowledging their presence.

A little more than an hour later, tired, footsore, and thirsty, they arrived at a small fishing village that lay half under the jungle and half on the upper reaches of a glistening black beach. The beach itself lay between two steep-sided promontories.

Medlin asked, in English, "How long till the volcano blows?"

"Not long," said Garrick.

"Are we far enough away?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure, Med."

On the beach, villagers—women, children, and old men—were pulling in a long net. Offshore, younger men in small boats slapped their oars against the water.

"That is to frighten the fish," Madame said, "and keep them from escaping the net."

The girl Elizabeth voiced a complaint. It was the first sound Medlin

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could remember hearing her make. It was like the squeak of a young cat.

Madame stroked her hair and murmured to her in creole, then turned to them.

"We can rest here," she said, "and probably get something to eat and drink."

"Good," said Garrick. "My mouth feels like a lava bed."

They walked down into the village. An ancient woman told them that soon there would be fresh fish to eat, for the catch was much better this morning than it had been for the past several days. She explained that there was no good water for coffee and no rum, only some sugar-cane juice. She poured the juice into wooden cups for them. It tasted grassy. The four refugees sipped and watched from a discreet distance as the villagers hauled in their net.

"They'll send someone else," Medlin said after a while.

Garrick shook her head. "They don't *have* anyone else. No one like us. No one."

"They could get lucky and find another real traveler."

"Maybe not. Listen, Beers and his group have got to be from our future. I saw 'em using equipment no volcanologist ever saw in *our* time, let alone in nineteen oh two. Believe me, I've learned a lot about volcanology lately. Now, I imagine there's about as much wrong with the world in Beers' time as there is in the Awful Oughts, but seeing these scientists and historians going about their work here—unchaperoned, unfettered, undisturbed by anyone except us—sure suggests to me that temporal engineering didn't even get out of the starting gate. Why? Because it requires a traveler to carry meddling passengers. Why wasn't there a traveler? Because we two travelers went AWOL, and no one else qualified for the j—"

There was a sudden sound like a cannonade, and the feeble sun disappeared completely. The sound did not fade but grew louder by the moment. It came to the village like a rolling barrage of artillery fire. The villagers screamed inaudibly and scattered across the beach. To the north, the glowing cloud climbed into the sky, filled it, displaced it. The cloud was red and edged with black, then black suffused with red, and as it expanded it resembled God's or the Devil's great opening hand. Fire and lightning flashed through it. One sickly purple flash showed Medlin stranded fish thrashing on the sand near his feet. The next showed him Madame Boislaville, in tears, plainly terrified, with Elizabeth at her side, clutching her waist, looking at the cloud with wide cat eyes and open mouth. He reached out and took Madame's hand and felt her strong dark fingers grasp his needfully. Holding hands was no guarantee of anything, but sometimes it was good for a little reassurance.●

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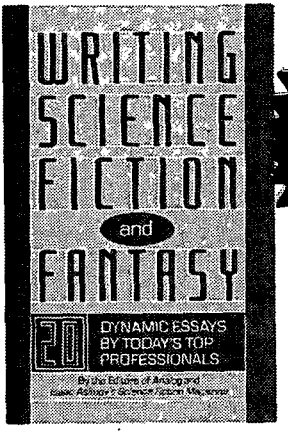

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Two-Year Transmission

Slow Freight
By F. M. Busby
Bantam, $4.99 (paper)

So you've invented a matter transmitter, or at least you're pretty sure you have. But things that go in the front gate, later to be called "the mouth," just don't come out the back gate, later to be called, rather vulgarly, "the tush." Eventually your university ends up using it as a super garbage disposal (several people and a warm body have already gone in for one reason or another). Finally, you walk in yourself.

Now here's where the gimmick and the title of F. M. Busby's neat little novel, *Slow Freight*, comes in. Turns out that it takes two years for things to go from mouth to tush, and after two years everything that went in starts coming out, including all the garbage, the warm body (the murderer's caught), the would-be suicides, and the inventor, to a round of applause from those waiting for him. But who needs a two year matter transmitter? Aha! In what field of endeavor do years count so little that two are not that much? You got it. Space travel. So Busby sets up this dizzying concept of interplanetary/stellar space ships with fuel, supplies, and personnel coming and going, the last in shifts losing four years of life in transit. Add to this the complications of time dilation and you have a real bowl of good old-fashioned SF pasta with some yummy high tech sauce for those who can figure it out. (I got a little lost despite the fact that the hero is a scientist turned PR man skilled in popularizing these concepts and selling them to politicians and public.)

That's not all that's saucy about the book—Busby spends a fair amount of time on sex, human and alien. In fact, a major plot factor is that one shift captain is a megalomaniac Russian female who uses sex as a power ploy and plans to take over the ship for good, a plot that our hero must thwart with all sort of machinations. (Her name is Irena Tetzl, aka "Old Iron Tits.")

Alien? Oh, yes, the aliens. Seems that our two year matter transmitter "beams" act like piano wires on anything going FTL, and guess what runs into one? "Environ," the remains of an alien race in a world-sized ship. The result of this encounter brings it below light speed, and to crank back up again they must absorb a world or two. And guess what the nearest system is? Whoops—there goes Rhea, Dione and Europa, and it's heading toward Luna. . . . (The alien sex isn't

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that much of a turn on, by the way—lots of palps and tentacles and things.)

Busby has given us a good, classic-type SF novel here, with enough tech for *that* crowd, and enough plot for *that* crowd, and enough sex for *that* crowd (not that sex played that much a part in the past of SF as to be classic).

More Than Skin Deep

Beauty
By Sheri S. Tepper
Doubleday, $12 (paper)

This is the second book by Sheri Tepper I've reviewed within a year, which isn't quite cricket by the arbitrary rules of this column; nonetheless, I was so intrigued by her SF novel, *Raising the Stones,* that I decided to indulge myself and see what she would do with a full scale fantasy, her latest novel called *Beauty.*

First off, let's get one thing straight. A decade or so ago, Robin McKinley wrote a delightful short novel called *Beauty,* which was a sophisticated (but straightforward) retelling of *Beauty and the Beast,* with an intelligent and witty heroine. The current *Beauty* is a very sophisticated (and very devious) retelling of *The Sleeping Beauty* with an intelligent and witty heroine (gifts at the christening, of course). I find this title duplication more than unfortunate since we have two very good, but very different novels here.

Tepper sets the stage with what amounts to a theological backdrop worthy of Tolkien or Lewis. We are filled in on this by the fairy Carabosse, fairy of clocks and keeper of the secret of time, whom readers of the original story and ballet-goers will know to be the wicked one. Here she is literally on the side of the angels—who are kin of the inhabitants of Faery. She refers to them as "those elevated elves so popular among aesthetic fantasists"; they are Israfel and his kin. They do not live in Faery, which is not an imaginary world, but intimately related to ours, rather as the two sides of a coin are related. There are many inhabitants of Faery, which is ruled by Oberon. The political situation is this: when the Holy One created man and asked the inhabitants of Faery to help the creature fulfill his potential, only Israfel and a few of his fellows assented, along with Carabosse. One of the major members of Faery revolted entirely at aiding this dirty ape, and departed, to build his own world. He will be known, among other things, as the Dark Lord.

Against this intricate theological background is played out, with infinite decoration, variation and addition, the story of the Sleeping Beauty. We read it in the words of Beauty, set in the frame of Carabosse's narrative (which takes the form of interjected explanation and, at times, invective). The tone is curiously light for such a heavily complex background, but for the most part Tepper manages a neat balancing act between light and high fantasy.

Beauty is born and lives out the first part of her life in the fourteenth century in a small principality in Europe—it is most definitely *our* world. Her mother was a fairy, which started the trouble. It was her maternal aunts who

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came to the christening and handed out all those gifts, and needless to say Carabosse does not really curse Beauty, but pretends to (with Israfel's help) so as to confound the Dark Lord, while really "planting" something in the baby which is to be kept from Him.

The curse of a hundred-years sleep does descend, but on Beauty's bastard half-sister. Beauty escapes to an odyssey which would take half this issue simply to synopsize, and which covers several imaginary worlds as well as the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The latter is a particularly bold stroke on Tepper's part, because while there have been hybrid SF/fantasies ever since de Camp and Pratt's Harold Shea stories, a combination such as elves and dystopic futures don't mix. At least they shouldn't, but Tepper, I think, carries it off, *mirabile dictu*. And just to add yet another dimension, Beauty's daughter and granddaughter (Beauty lives for over a century) get mixed up in situations which can only be the "originals" for Cinderella and Snow White (the seven dwarves are Basque-speaking —don't ask). This is much to Beauty's consternation, since she knows her twentieth-century fairy tales (and her Disney) from her stay there. ("Legends gather around some people," says Puck.)

This is yet another of those intricate novels that is the despair of the reviewer; one can but say, plunge in. There are endless surprises in store which, at least, I don't have the space to spoil for you.

There will be those who find *Beauty* pretentious and to a degree preachy, because Tepper has an axe to grind about the nastiness of today and the horror of the future. But Lord knows, she, too, is on the side of the angels (quite literally in this case)—she is preaching against the sordid sadism of the culture and world we find ourselves in, and she is preaching *for*, as well as through, Beauty.

A La Russe

No Return

By Alexander Kabakov (translated by Thomas Whitney)
Morrow, $15.95

Given the fact that Russia is on everybody's mind these days, just for fun let's see what this bit of Russian speculative fiction is about, it having caused some stir in mainstream circles. (Make a stir in Russia, get translated, you're bound to make a stir in the West no matter how trivial the material is originally; it's like defecting Russian ballet dancers—who cares whether they're good or not?). It's called *No Return* and it's by Alexander Kabakov, translated from the Russian by Thomas Whitney.

The term "speculative fiction" is deliberately used above simply because if one called this novel science fiction, one would probably get an argument. In my simplistic view, *anything* that takes place in the future must perforce be speculative, therefore leaving us with arguing the difference between science fiction and speculative fiction. Let's not.

In any case, Kabakov has made pretty sure that it won't be speculative that long, since most of the book is set in 1993 (there's to be a movie which, with luck, will at least appear before then). The hero,

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one Yuri, works for some sort of government/academic institution as an "extrapolator." Right here, we start wondering about the problems of translation—could that mean what we know of as a "futurist"? In any case, after some initial intrigue and arm twisting in the present by what we presume to be government agents to apply his "futurist" talents to an unspecified project, we (and Yuri) find ourselves in an anarchic Moscow of 1993.

Russia is run by a motley congress of disparate religious and political persuasions. There's nuclear bombing of some level around the Persian Gulf. The streets are ruled by gangs of all sorts—veterans of the Afghan war, child drug addicts (benzine seems to be the drug of choice), anti-Semitic "Vikings," warring Islamic sects and other motley anarchic packs terrorize the citizens, while various exploiters manage to live well in the chaos.

Given the many dystopias we've seen in the past decade in American SF, there's nothing really new here for the American reader except the exoticism of the milieu. As with so much Central European and Russian—er—speculative fiction, the social significance is laid on pretty thickly; the heaviness of the narrative could be laid to the translation. In any case, if you're going to read it, do so fast. Nineteen ninety-three isn't that far away.

The VERY Big Time

The Big Time
By Fritz Leiber
Collier, $4.95 (paper)

Some of the landmark books in SF are well-known and constantly in print. Other works, equally important, for various reasons slip in and out of availability. I deem it part of a conscientious reviewer's duty to call the reader's attention to such whenever they reappear (particularly since the current reader is sometimes so woefully ignorant of the past of the genre). I don't think I have ever had a happier duty than to announce the reappearance in print of Fritz Leiber's *The Big Time*.

It's a very short novel, barely more than a novella. The length, of course, is because it is from the days of a primary magazine market when the preferred length was short. If one must make comparisons, let me compare it in its importance in the field (and these are only the most superficial of comparisons) to E. E. Smith, who took the concept of space travel and expanded it from piddling trips to Mars to all of the universe as a backdrop, and Asimov's further breathtaking leap from there with the "Foundation" books, with a vast extrapolation of the "soft" sciences and crossing galactic time as Smith had crossed galactic space. In *The Big Time,* Leiber also makes one of those leaps of cosmic speculation which left one gasping (and still does).

The concept of the alternate universe was not a new one when *The Big Time* was first published in 1958, and there had even been the idea of an infinity of such. But in this short novel, Leiber makes all of time and space an alternating, altering cosmos, a perpetually changing "reality," used as a battlefield by two races so remote and beyond man as to redefine the word

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"alien"; Earth and its history are just one battlefront of many. These races manipulate and change reality to suit their tactical purposes in an infinite "Change War." To take this idea and make it comprehensible as a working concept, comprehensible to the reader *and* as a backdrop for an authentic human drama, makes for a major *tour de force* of SF.

Among the many problems set by this premise and blithely solved by Leiber is how does one get any consistent characters in a universe populated only by beings whose lives (and memories) are constantly being altered? Well, the opposing forces (the "Snakes" and the "Spiders," as humans call them) draft human and alien beings, placing them in special places outside the "change winds." These are not only soldiers, but medical personnel, entertainers for R&R, et al. In the Change War human slang, they are "doppelgangers" (who operate both in the cosmos and out of it) and/or "demons" because they're aware of what's going on. They are on "the Big Time." The rest of humanity are "zombies" (that's you and me, kid).

Now, as if this mind-boggling background weren't brilliant enough, Leiber chooses to unveil this conception with another bit of genius: he doesn't set his story in some grandiose or important part of the Change War. The whole tale takes place in a "Spider" R&R place (if it can even be called that) and is told in the first person by a female "entertainer" (read whore/nurse/sister-figure) who manages to explain this whole dizzying concept to the reader as she and her coworkers (three male, two female) cope with the various comings and goings of the military to whom they cater. If nothing else, this novel should be required reading for every fledgling SF writer on the art of exposition, a skill that few writers seem to think necessary to acquire these days.

In fact, let's throw caution to the winds and say that Leiber's *The Big Time* should be required reading for anyone who claims to be knowledgeable science fictionally. I don't usually devote this much space to reprints, but this novel deserves to be as well known as some others that are not half so good. And, by gum, I'll devote a little more space to it by noting that it would make a perfect drama since it observes the classic Unities of Corneille—action, time, and place—and wouldn't need *that* much in the way of special effects or even rewriting. It would simply need an intelligent audience. Any TV producers out there willing to take the chance?

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc.... As a recent refugee from the battle zone known as New York City, an anthology I'm sure to avoid is *Newer York*, edited by Lawrence Watt-Evans. However, those who have not spent thirty-seven years watching that city go downhill might enjoy it vicariously (ROC, $4.50, paper)... The antic short fiction of Carol Emshwiller makes up *The Start of the End of it All*—don't expect the expected (Mercury House, $17.95 cloth, $10.95 paper).

Sequels, prequels, series and

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whatnot . . . Teresa Edgerton has favored us with a sequel to the marvelously elegant *Goblin Moon,* and I, for one, couldn't be happier. This one is less provocatively titled *The Gnome's Engine* (Ace, $4.50, paper) . . . Fans of John Christopher's "Tripods Trilogy" (of which I am one—nobody can do the end-of-civilization like the Brits used to) need only hear the title of *When the Tripods Came* to want it (Collier, $3.95, paper) . . . The third volume of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* saga, which started off with such a bang with *The Eye of the World,* is *The Dragon Reborn* (Tor, $22.95).

Miscellaneous . . . An experiment that bears watching . . . a line of books that couples a complete science fiction novel with a related article about "cutting edge" scientific phenomena. The first two are *Red Genesis,* science fiction by S.C. Sykes and science fact by Eugene Mallove, and *Alien Tongue,* fiction by Stephen Leigh, fact by Rudy Rucker. Should be a high-techie's delight (Bantam, $4.99 each, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories 23 (1961)* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $5.50, paper); *Russian Spring* by Norman Spinrad (Bantam, $20). ●

NEXT ISSUE

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for a chilling and suspenseful confrontation with some very ancient traditions, high in the Andes among the "Kingdoms in the Sky"; new writer **Jennifer Evans** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a sprightly study of some of the high-tech complications of life in the Computer Age, in "Gate Crashing"; **Joel Richards** takes us to a time-haunted Danish island for a bittersweet tale of memory and loss, in his moving *IAsfm* debut story, "Overlays"; Hugo-winner **Lawrence Watt-Evans** returns to spin a very funny story about an Indescribable Horror that could even now be traveling over *your* phone line, in the Eldritch but wry story of "Pickman's Modem"; and new writer **Jamil Nasir,** making his *IAsfm* debut, tells the thoughtful and thought-provoking story of what happens to those who venture up "The Heaven Tree." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 7, 1992.

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——"The Return of Weird Frank" (nt) ..... Dec 120
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Stewart, ER "Entropy Ad" (p) . Dec 14
Strauss, Erwin S. "The SF Conventional Calendar" ..... Jan 192
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Wilde, Dana "Gravitational Interconnectedness" (p) ..... Mar 77
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Yolen, Jane "Angels Fly Because They Take Themselves Lightly" (p) ..... Dec 118
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IASFM 15TH ANNIVERSARY SURVEY

In 1992, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary. To commemorate this special occasion in science fiction publishing, we are considering producing a number of special items and making them available to our loyal readers.

We need your help to ensure that we produce merchandise that you will find appealing. Following is a list of suggested items. Please rank these items in the order of their interest to you. (Number 1 reflecting the greatest degree of interest.)

_____T-shirt featuring *IAsfm* anniversary art
_____Sweatshirt featuring *IAsfm* anniversary art
_____Lapel or tie pin
_____Coffee mug
_____Novelty wristwatch (around $19.95)
_____Luxury wristwatch (around $39.95)
_____Necktie
_____*IAsfm* baseball cap
_____Posters or prints
_____Tote bag
_____Audio cassette, featuring Isaac Asimov

Do you have any suggestions for items that Davis Publications might produce to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*? Please write your suggestions below.

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Please send your response to:

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New York, NY 10168-0035
Attention: Cynthia Manson

Thank you for your help.

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SIXTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Another year has gone to join the dodos and the dinosaurs, and *that* means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, now in its sixth year.

Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, I should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you,* the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, cover artist and interior artist you liked best in 1991. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *IAsfm* (pp. 168–171) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual *poem,* rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some further cautions: Only material from 1991-dated issues of *IAsfm* is eligible. Each reader gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index**. No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1992, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10168-0035.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, voter response has been good, and some categories have been hotly contended, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference. So don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

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BEST NOVELLA

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST POEM

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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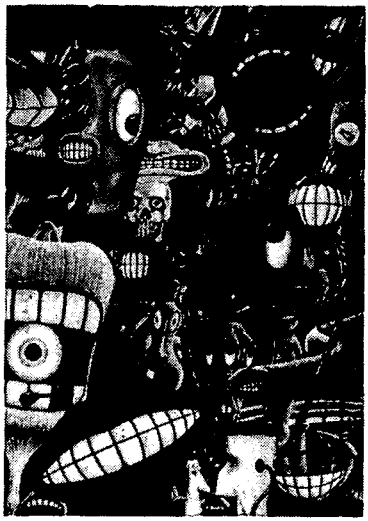

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Join ConFrancisco, the 1993 WorldCon, before rates rise at the end of the year. Plan a social weekend with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) to Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. When calling (early evening's good), say why you're calling right off. Look for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge and musical keyboard.

DECEMBER 1991

13-15—**SMOFCon.** For info, write: **Box 5703, Portland OR 97228.** Or phone: **(503) 774-7592 or (503) 283-0803** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Portland OR (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Shilo Inn. The annual convention where people who run cons meet to talk shop.

JANUARY 1992

3-5—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq., #322, Cambridge MA 02139.** Park Plaza Hotel, Boston, MA. C. S. Gardner.

3-5—**EveCon, 1607 Thomas Rd., Ft. Washington MD 20744. (301) 292-5231.** A younger crowd.

3-5—**MusiCon, Box 198121, Nashville, TN 37219.** A newcomer to New Year's scene, for SF folksinging.

4-5—**This Old Con, Box 119, Brentwood MD 20722.** Guest Quarters Airport, Baltimore MD. Low-key.

17-19—**SerCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 835-9304.** Jonathan Carroll. For written-SF fans.

17-19—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (404) 578-8461.** Gardner, Cherryh, Watt-Evans.

17-19—**RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124.** Spider and Jeanne Robinson, Mark Ferrari, Dragon.

24-26—**BamaCon, Box 6542, U. AL, Tuscaloosa AL 35486. (205) 758-4577.** Clement, Cherryh, Fancher.

24-26—**SwanCon, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.** Perth's annual West Australian convention.

FEBRUARY 1992

7-9—**CzarKon, 1156 Remley Ct., University City MO 63130. (314) 725-6448.** Adults-only relax-a-con.

7-9—**PsurrealCon, Box 2069, Norman OK 73070.** Tad Williams, R. Bailey, Bill Hodgson, C. Hamilton.

14-16—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Jane Yolen.

14-16—**EclectiCon, Box 19040, Sacramento CA 95819. (408) 225-0569.** No guests are confirmed yet.

14-16—**ChimeraCon, Kingswood Apts. #H-7, Chapel Hill NC 27514.** At the UNC Student Union.

28-Mar. 1—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134. (502) 586-3366.** At the Park Mammoth Resort, KY.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $85 to 9/30/91.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. #1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598.** San Francisco CA. $70 in 1991.

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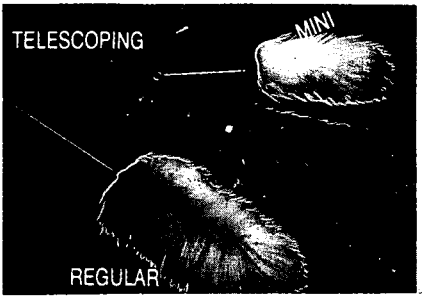

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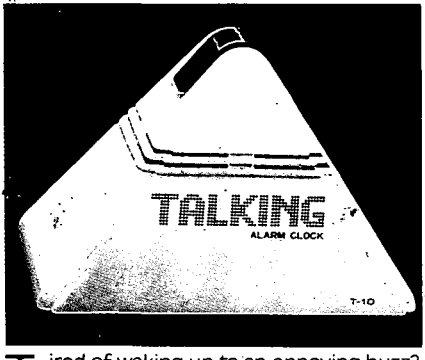

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